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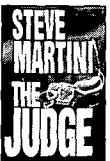
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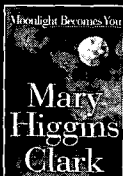
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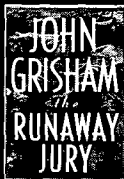
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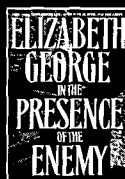
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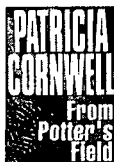
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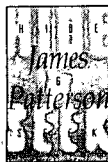
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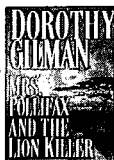
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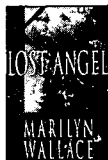
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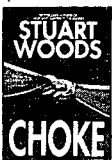
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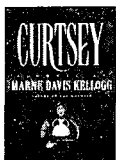
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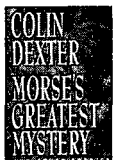
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 41, No. 7, July, 1996. Published monthly except for a March/April double issue by Dell Magazines, Inc. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$43.45 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3311 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1996 by Dell Magazines, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5124, Harlan, IA 51593-5124. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

John Lutz has written more than seventy stories for AHMM, including "What You Don't Know Can Hurt You," the first annual Shamus Award winner for Best Private Eye Short Story (1982), given by the Private Eye Writers of America, and "Ride the Lightning," winner of the Edgar Award for Best Short Story of 1985, given by the Mystery Writers of America, and expanded into a novel of the same name in 1987. Both stories (and others) starred antacid-popping, St. Louis-based private detective Alo Nudger, whose most recent appearance in a novel was in *Death by Jury* (St. Martin's) last September.

Mr. Lutz's very first short story, "Thieves' Honor," appeared in AHMM in 1966, and in this issue he joins forces with David August, another short story

first-timer, in "Toad Crossing." Mr. August has four novels to his credit, however, the latest being *Housebreaker* (Dutton, 1987) by David Linzee (his real name, changed to avoid confusion with David E. Lindsey); he tells us, "I've known John Lutz for eighteen years and we live only five miles apart, but he didn't invite me to collaborate until I grew a beard like his. We're a small, convivial group here in St. Louis. The entire local mystery-writing community can fit in an average-size apartment—and does, every February, when I hold my annual 'literary soiree.'"

We are also pleased to introduce William Schoell, author of the delightful "Handel's Mess" as well as many other stories, books of nonfiction, and novels, most recently *Fatal Beauty* (St. Martin's, 1990).

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Senior Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czezko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Cynthia Manson**, Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **George Schumacher**, Manager, Contracts and Permissions; **Kathleen Halligan**, Subsidiary Rights and Marketing Coordinator; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York: (212) 782-8549. Advertising Representative: Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.**

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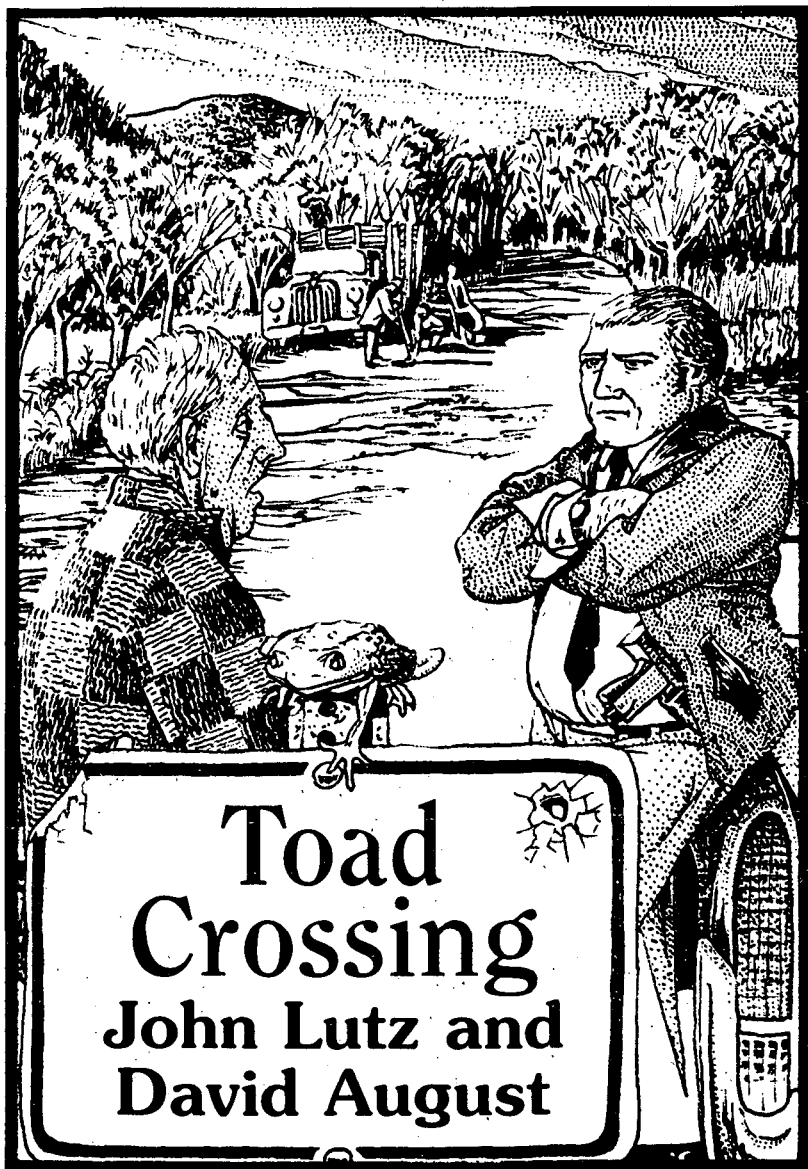


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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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Standing up on the pedals as if he were a kid instead of a sixty-four-year-old man, Mr. Fitzherbert labored to the top of the hill. Reaching it, he sat down on the bicycle's seat to coast the rest of the way. He was gasping for breath. The wind felt wonderful on his sweaty brow.

On his left was a wooded hillside with the trees putting out their first green leaves; on his right was Leman Pond glittering in the slanting evening light. And dead ahead was the ominous form of Buck Earley pacing beside his employer's black limousine.

Spotting Mr. Fitzherbert, Earley stood still and put his hands on his hips. His leather-trimmed black jacket flapped open to reveal the large pistol strapped to his ribs. Mr. Fitzherbert swallowed hard. Earley was the bodyguard for a rich man who lived in one of the big summer houses down the road, so he had a right to carry a concealed weapon; Mr. Fitzherbert just wished he would conceal it a little better.

"You took your time getting here," Earley said.

"Came as fast as I could," Mr. Fitzherbert panted as he clambered off the bike with due respect for his old bones. "What did you want to see me about, Mr. Earley?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I was walking the road checking that everything was secure when I spotted something I hadn't seen before. So I called Town Hall, and they told me you were the person to talk to about it."

Earley walked onto the berm and pointed down at the mouth of a culvert set into the road-bank. "So tell me, what is that?"

"Why, that's my toad crossing." Mr. Fitzherbert couldn't keep the pride out of his voice. He'd worked long and hard to persuade the Haverville Board of Selectmen to put in the toad crossing.

"Your *what*?"

Obviously Buck Earley didn't see the beauty and utility of the concept; Mr. Fitzherbert would have to explain. But he was used to doing that. "It's a little tunnel so the toads can go under the road instead of over it. They need it especially at this time of year, the poor little fellas."

"Oh, they do?"

"Yes. You see, they sleep all winter in the mud down by the pond. In April they wake up and head for the woods, but they're still kind of sleepy and slow. Hundreds of them used to get squished by cars on this road. Made me sad to see it."

"And you actually talked the selectmen into building a tunnel for these toads?"

Mr. Fitzherbert nodded vigor-

ously. "They have a lot of toad crossings over in England, but I think this is the first one here in Connecticut."

"No kidding. So how do the toads know there's a tunnel? You put little signs down there in toad language?"

Mr. Fitzherbert straightened up and tucked in his chin. Obviously Buck Earley was going to be a tough sell. "This is the shortest way from the pond to the woods. Toads were using it long before there was a road here. They have the right of way as I see it."

"Yeah, well, I *don't* see it that way."

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Mr. Fitzherbert slowly. He was beginning to get worried.

Earley folded his arms and leaned against the fender of the limousine. He looked down the road toward where a dusty black county truck was parked and three men were laboring noisily with pickaxes, shovels, and a vat of hot, smelly tar. The filling of potholes was as familiar a New England spring ritual as the awakening of the toads. Earley turned back to Mr. Fitzherbert. "Your toad tunnel's gotta go. Sorry." But he didn't really seem particularly sorry.

Mr. Fitzherbert stood blinking in astonishment. "But . . . why?"

"Because it's a breach of security. You know who I work for,

don't you?" He smiled thinly. "Way people like to gossip around here, you probably know all about General Somona."

Mr. Fitzherbert did. Somona had been the notoriously cruel and corrupt ruler of a small Latin American nation. When he'd been overthrown, the U.S. had granted him asylum. But there were people in his country who weren't willing to let bygones be bygones, according to the news media. General Somona needed Buck Earley to keep him alive.

"I don't see how the poor toads can be any threat to your employer," said Mr. Fitzherbert.

"Not the toads, the culvert." Earley straightened up so that he loomed over Mr. Fitzherbert. "I'm going to try to explain this to you, so listen good. Say you're an assassin. How're you going to get at General Somona?"

Mr. Fitzherbert coughed. The fumes of the road crew's hot tar were beginning to bother him. "Well, I suppose I'd sneak up on his house with a rifle and—"

Earley shook his head. "You wouldn't get near the house. I've got the whole area secured. No, the only time the general's vulnerable is when he's traveling in his car."

"Then I suppose I'd set up an ambush on some road or other."

"Not so easy. I vary my routes

so you can't do that." Earley held up his forefinger. "With one exception. There's only one road to the general's house. This road. So this is where you set up your ambush. What're you going to do?"

"Do?"

"How're you gonna go about setting up the ambush?"

Mr. Fitzherbert, who had never considered ambushing anyone, was finding this conversation more and more uncongenial. "Well, I suppose I'd hide up in the trees with some sort of machine gun."

"Your rounds will never penetrate my armor plate and bullet-proof glass. And when I see your muzzle flashes, I open up with my Mac-10 and neutralize you." Earley slapped the gun under his jacket and smiled grimly. "No, you got only one choice, and that's a land mine."

"Land mine?"

"You have to blow me up. Now, where you going to put it?" Without waiting for an answer, Earley pointed straight down. "You're a pro. You know what success the IRA and the German terrorists have had with culvert bombs. So you're going to cram this culvert full of explosives—"

"No, I'm not," interrupted Mr. Fitzherbert.

"You're not?" Earley looked confused. "Why not?"

"Because then the toads couldn't get through."

Earley propped his fists on his hips and shook his head. "Here's the way it's gonna be: First thing tomorrow, you and I are heading down to Town Hall. I'm gonna say the toad crossing has to be blocked up for security reasons, and you're gonna say you don't object."

"But I do object."

"A man's life is in danger and all you care about are a bunch of slimy toads?"

"Toads are not slimy," retorted Mr. Fitzherbert. "Which is more than I can say for General Somona."

"Money talks. And I bet the Board of Selectmen are gonna listen."

"Maybe. But not tomorrow morning. The board doesn't meet until the first of the month." Now it was Mr. Fitzherbert's turn to smile. "It took me over a year to get the crossing put in. It'll take you at least that long to get it closed."

Still with his fists on his hips, Earley began to pace. He looked down the road. Then he grinned at Fitzherbert. "Know what? It's five o'clock now. At six I plan to be driving the general down this road. At that time, your tunnel will be blocked off."

"That's ridiculous."

Earley pointed at the county truck and the men filling in the

pothole. "Here's a work crew. They can take care of it."

"But they work for the county! You can't just—"

Putting two fingers in his mouth, Earley whistled shrilly. A man who was leaning on his shovel looked up at the noise. Earley waved him over. The man put down the shovel and started walking in their direction. People tended not to ignore Buck Earley.

"They—they won't do it!" stammered Mr. Fitzherbert. "Not without an order from the board!"

"Sure they will," said Earley as he took out his wallet.

He was right. Money talked. It said emphatically that within an hour the toad crossing tunnel would be blocked.

Leaving his bicycle to fall over with a clatter, Mr. Fitzherbert rushed into his cottage. He'd pedaled home as fast as he could, but he knew that Town Hall would be closed by now. But he was able to catch the First Selectwoman, Harriet Dorr, at home. He told her what had happened, pausing only to gasp for breath. "They were doing it as I left, Harriet! They were wheeling up the hot tar."

"And this was on Leman Pond Road, you said? This is all very strange. I didn't even know

there was a crew working there today."

"Harriet, they were *there*. I saw them. Now, the question is, are you going to stand for—"

She wasn't listening. "Leman Pond Road. I'm going to have to check on this. Hold for a minute."

Mr. Fitzherbert stood there gripping the receiver. It was a quiet evening, and he could hear the church bells in the village tolling six. He didn't doubt that Buck Earley would be right on schedule. Even now he was behind the wheel of the limousine with his employer comfortably ensconced behind him, driving down Leman Pond Road. Perhaps he would have the pleasure of personally crushing a few toads under his tires. The thought made Mr. Fitzherbert's blood boil.

Harriet Dorr was back, rustling papers and sounding confused. "I was right. There was no crew working Leman Pond Road today."

"There wasn't? Then who were they?"

"Also I've been looking at the work orders, and there are no potholes anywhere near your toad crossing."

"Harriet, I saw them filling in a hole. Now what're you going to tell me, that they dug it themselves?"

"They must have because there was no hole there."

"Why would they do that?"

As he said the words, the obvious answer came to him: *to bury something.*

In the next instant he heard the explosion—a deep, faraway boom. It rattled the teacups in Mr. Fitzherbert's cupboards.

As soon as the police reopened Leman Pond Road, Mr. Fitzherbert went out there taking along two young friends with pickaxes. As they worked to break open the entrances to the culvert, Mr. Fitzherbert brooded.

He felt a bit guilty about Buck Earley and his employer; there was no doubt that in the argument over the toad crossing Mr. Fitzherbert had provided the Hit Team—as the newspaper called them—with a perfect distraction while they placed their mine. But after all, it had been inadvertent.

Mr. Fitzherbert was pleased that it took only a few minutes' work to open the toad tunnel again. The Hit Team hadn't done a very good job of filling in the entrances.

Perhaps they were toad fanciers, too.

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FICTION

To Kill a Ghost

Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Mark Penta

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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Marge's shrill screams must have stirred one of our keen-eared, light-sleeping neighbors into dialing 911. Minutes after we reached the road at the end of the driveway, the police were there and the EMS techs had taken her off my hands. Rotating red and blue lights eerily lighted up the trees and treated the sparse assembly of the curious to the spectacle of a hysterical woman in a filmy nightgown and her skinny, forty-year-old husband in pajama bottoms.

Bent over, I clasped my trembling knees in sweaty palms and tried to breathe deeply. I'd never been so frightened in my life because I had no idea why my wife of two years had been screaming her lungs out, her eyes wide with horror. She'd always been calm, cool, and collected, although I'd sensed an unseen crack beneath that exterior. Not that I cared. We all have our little secrets, and I had no doubt that one day she'd tell me about it. Love, after all, is implicit trust.

All I could do was race after her as she bolted out the back door and around the house toward the road as though escaping the hounds of hell.

A patrolman put a hand on my back. "They think it best to have the hospital check her out, Mr. Campbell. If you'll get some

clothes on, we'll take you there."

I nodded, wondering how I'd explain it to hard-nosed cops who'd be entertaining visions of spousal abuse or a bad drug trip, especially since I hadn't the faintest idea what in the hell had been going on.

True, she'd stuttered something like *g-g-gho-ghost* when I caught her, but her face had been buried in my shoulder. A bit difficult for me to be convincing about that. I'd always said I'd believe in ghosts and extraterrestrials when one waved at me in my own yard.

Yet she'd seen something that had sent her into hysterics. I wasn't too bright when it came to women—one reason I was in my late thirties before I married—but I was smart enough to know that if I didn't find out what had frightened her and get rid of it she'd never set foot in that house again.

Marge's grandfather had been the type of stockbroker who made more money for himself than for all his clients put together. With the typical male reasoning of those days he'd left the bulk of his liquid assets to Marge's father; after all, everyone knew women didn't know how to handle money. He willed the family estate, with enough cash to run it, to

her Aunt Jennifer so his financially ignorant daughter would always have a place to live. And quite an estate it was—out in the rolling countryside in fox hunting territory—plenty of acreage to raise horses, canter about, and otherwise enjoy life.

He'd been wrong on both counts.

Marge's father had blown his liquid assets in short order. Couldn't handle a car with any greater skill, either; killing himself and her mother by ramming a two-hundred-year-old oak before airbags became standard on luxury cars.

Aunt Jennifer had taken over Marge's upbringing, fortunately doing no harm except perhaps making her reluctant to get married until I came along.

A sharp-nosed, thin-lipped rail of a woman with a tongue that dripped venom where men were concerned, she'd been middle-aged and single when the women's liberation movement began. She'd embraced it fervently (perhaps a result of all that money's going to her brother), marching about and burning her bras with abandon. In celebration of her freedom she'd also embraced one Alex Monet, a professional dry cleaner who was not only a master at removing various stains from clothing but very adept at reducing her so-called "walking around mon-

ey" to invisibility before disappearing himself.

This romantic interlude had turned her into a very bitter woman who, instead of living comfortably, owned a lot of nice acreage but no cash. She'd had to go to work to pay the bills. But she'd been brought up to be a lady and trained for nothing and at her age not many opportunities for gainful employment existed, so through the years she'd had to sell acres here and there for tax money.

She timed it nicely. When she died, all she had left was the house and two acres. She willed them to Marge, her only living relative. And friend. A faithful niece, Marge had visited her often, dragging a reluctant me along occasionally. In Aunt Jennifer's eyes, the male owner of a printing plant was as low as the male owner of a dry cleaning establishment.

Personally, I'd have put the property up for sale the day after we buried her in the iridescent green gown she specified. It must have had some special significance for her, but it was one of the ugliest dresses I'd ever seen.

Jennifer, though, decided it was to be our house. I had no objection. I didn't care where I lived as long as she was there. The house is more important to the woman, anyway. Something

to do with nesting instincts, I guess.

Living on the edge of financial disaster, Jennifer had done nothing to the house for years, the facilities only a cut above a well, an outhouse, and a coal-burning range. Stone, somewhat Georgian in style, two stories tall, half hidden by overgrown shrubbery at the end of a long, half-moon, gravel driveway, the house did have a graciousness and durability lacking in the new houses that had sprung up on either side and across the road.

We signed our lives away for an improvement loan, which Marge spent wisely and well. Six months later we moved in. The neighbors came to shake our hands, drink our liquor, and ooh and ah, except for a few who hinted we should have torn it down and built one like theirs because this old stone house destroyed the cultural ambience of the neighborhood. Whatever that was.

No hint anywhere of disaster to come.

After I determined that Marge would be fine by morning and recited the evening's events for the police several times, they drove me home—dropping me off with the clear attitude of: *We'll be keeping an eye on you, wiseguy.*

I stood in the entrance foyer and looked around. A door to the left led to the dining room. One to the right led to the den. The angled staircase was on the left, the door to the rear beneath it, another to a powder room in the corner.

Wisdom and understanding did not strike like a bolt from the blue, so I did what any sensible man would do. I went to the kitchen and poured myself a very large Jack Daniel's. Just as I raised it, a tap on the glass of the back door made me jump a foot and almost spill the drink. I opened it to my robed and pajamaed neighbors Celia and Claude Amber—a friendly pair of fireplugs who'd clasped us to their bosoms; a rotund pair who were suspicious of no one but each other. Claude's philosophy was that a husband's duty was to never let his wife know what he was up to, while Celia's was that a wife was responsible for anything that happened to her if she didn't keep her husband on a short leash.

Claude took the bottle and poured each of them a drink, and they settled at the kitchen table as if it was their own.

"Okay, Norman, what the hell happened?" demanded Celia. "I heard Marge screaming and dialed 911, but Sir Dimwit here grabbed his trusty revolver and went charging to the rescue. By

the time I got here, he was face-down on the grass with his hands cuffed behind his back. How were the cops to know the nut running around with the gun wasn't the cause of the screaming? Lucky they didn't shoot him."

"Could have been rape and murder," said Claude. "Did you want me to stand by?"

"It was a ghost," I said.

"Oh sure," said Celia. "You were having a spat and were going to beat her up, weren't you?"

I sighed. "I'll tell you what I told the cops. I woke up. Marge wasn't there. Nothing unusual because she always sneaks down in the middle of the night for a few crackers and a glass of milk. Then I heard her scream. I fell out of bed and charged down the stairs. We keep nightlights plugged in here and there so she doesn't have to turn on the lights. Marge was backed up against the wall in the foyer screaming. By the time I reached her, she was out through the kitchen and around the house."

I belted a long one down. "I have no idea what she saw, but it scared the hell out of her."

"I bet it isn't easy to scare Marge," said Celia. "What did she say?"

"She mumbled something about a ghost. Right now she's tranquilized and sleeping, but

hopefully she can tell us more in the morning. Whether she can or not isn't my immediate problem. I doubt she'll be willing to come back here until—I guess the best solution is a motel room."

"Not while we're next door," said Celia. "She stays with us. But listen. This house is what? A hundred years old? There could be *beaucoup* bones in the basement. Any talk of a ghost in the past?"

"If there had been, wouldn't it have scared Jennifer?"

"Jennifer? Yo, Norm. We only knew her for a year, but I guarantee no ghost would dare poke its head out while she was here."

I grinned for the first time that night. "Especially a male one."

"Should have sold it to Eustace, like I said," said Claude. "You could have really socked him, he wanted this place so bad. I heard he offered Jennifer a half mil. What did he offer you two?"

I shrugged. "He talked to Marge. Not my business. Her inheritance, her decision to keep or sell."

Celia sighed. "Now that's what I call a real husband."

"That's what I call a real wimp," said Claude.

"Why was he so interested?"

"Jeez, Norm. Look around.

You've got the best location. On top of the hill, beautiful view of the valley. Twice as much land as anyone else. He could tear this place down and put up *two* showplaces. The way prices are going, he'd score big, but more important to him, I guess, would be that he could complete his development. Must irritate the hell out of him to look at this place every time he passes. You ruin the cultural ambiance of all these nice modern houses he built—"

"What's cultural ambiance?"

"I think it's code for aluminum siding and decks. The question is, how are you going to handle this?"

"Find out what she saw, I guess, and get rid of it. Must be some way to kill a ghost."

"Get one of those whaddya call—expectorants—"

"Exorcist." Celia belted down her drink and struck a pose salvaged from one of her roles with the Shakespearean Drama Club. "Hark, my lord, even now the sky brightens in the east. Thou must soon go and earn thy daily pittance from the accursed money lenders. It is best we be off."

"How about you, Norman?" asked Claude.

"I have a sales manager who sometimes tells me what he's doing, a production chief who never does, and a bookkeeper

who pushes checks under my nose to sign. I'm just the owner. They don't need me. I'm going to work on this little problem."

"Well, any help you need—"

Celia hesitated at the door. "Are you sure you're not covering up a domestic dispute, Norman? I mean, that's probably the worst ghost story I've ever heard."

Claude dragged her out by the elbow. "When did you become an authority on the supernatural?"

"On our wedding night," she said demurely.

I refilled my glass, dragged a kitchen chair to the dim foyer, and settled down. Not that I expected Marge's ghost to reappear for my benefit but to try to imagine what might have happened.

The plug-in nightlights at the head and foot of the stairs barely defined a safe passage.

Directly opposite was the new front door Marge had installed; the center a full-length, matte, finely etched sheet of plate glass bordered by irregular bits of colorful stained glass.

No explanation for Marge's ghost occurred to me, not even with the assistance of the drink. When the colors of the stained glass glowed fully in the light of the new day, I took a cold shower, stuffed a skin-out outfit for Marge into a paper sack, and drove to the hospital.

Except for shadows under her brown eyes, she looked fine, but then she always looked good to me. She made the detective wait until she got her hair just right, as if a potbellied bald guy with tired eyes would care after seeing her the night before in that filmy nightgown with her hair resembling a rock star's wig.

Yes, she'd seen a ghost, she told him. She didn't know what else to call it, but if he had another explanation for what had scared her silly, she'd like to hear it. He left, obviously thinking he had a choice between a wife foolishly covering up for an abusive husband or a pair of genuine loonies tripping out on some really bad stuff.

We left, too. Don't question her too closely, said the doctor. She'll tell you exactly what she saw when she's ready.

Might as well sell the damned house, she said as we drove along. She wasn't going to live there.

"Where's your fighting spirit? You're going to let a ghost drive you from your ancestral home?"

"You betcha." Even I could tell the brightness was forced. "Especially since I can make a healthy profit."

"How? Who will buy a house with a resident ghost?"

"So I'll take a little loss."

"You'll take a very big one."

She was silent the rest of the way.

Although she'd said she wouldn't live there, by the time we arrived she'd come to a compromise with herself. She'd stay during the day, but she'd sleep at Celia's. Ghosts appeared only at night, and she had to work in the room she used as a studio and I used as a home office. Not that I'd ever managed to get much done when we were in there together. Her watercolors had achieved a nice little reputation. Envious, I'd sit and watch. I'd have given my left arm to be able to paint like that, but hell, I couldn't even manage a paint-by-number set.

I was making a pot of coffee when she came up behind me and put her arms around me.

"Maybe I wouldn't have been so frightened if it hadn't been my father." Her voice was soft and breaking. "He was standing there in the doorway with his hand out, just like that old picture I have."

I covered her hands with mine. "Would it upset you to show it to me?"

She hesitated. "I guess not."

She flipped through the album as we sipped our coffee at the kitchen table.

"That's the one," she whispered. "He seemed to be floating, asking me to go with him."

The black and white showed

him wearing a light-colored suit and a big smile, his hand extended as if inviting the photographer along for a drive in the Packard sedan in the back-ground. Strong, handsome face, full head of wavy hair. Good Time Charlie personified. Even a snapshot conveyed the impression that headwaiters would scramble to find him a table. A different size and texture from the others, the photo appeared to be a contribution to the family records.

"Who took the picture?"

"I have no idea."

I thought for a moment. "I've heard of many people who claim they've seen loved ones who have died, but I don't recall any being frightened."

"I never told you," she said. "I hated my father. He was a loud, abusive drunk and womanizer who treated my mother horribly. He got worse after he lost Grandfather's money. Aunt Jennifer said it was because neither one of them had ever learned how to handle failure."

Ah, I thought, the crack revealed. I suddenly had a great deal of respect for Aunt Jennifer. For a maiden aunt, she'd done a helluva job of parenting. That kind of family background could have easily pushed Marge into drugs or alcohol.

She moved to the window, hugging herself as though cold

and looking at the view Claude had praised.

"I should have known better than to come back here, but I loved Aunt Jennifer and this place and he's been dead so long. I don't know why, but ever since we moved in, I've felt he's still here and wants something from me. That's why I was so frightened."

"Who else would know how you felt about him?"

Her shoulders lifted. "Anyone who was around when he was killed, I suppose. I was sixteen and made no secret that I was weeping for my mother, not him, or that I blamed him for her death. It took Aunt Jennifer a long time to talk me out of it. That part, anyway. I never said anything because it was in the past. Dead and buried."

"Until now."

"Maybe I have feelings of guilt that are asserting themselves—"

"Save that for a TV miniseries. We'll throw in an unscrupulous tycoon with a passionate mistress in every penthouse, a sex-crazed gardener, a mysterious woman in a black robe, and a pizza delivery kid who turns into a vampire because he comes from a dysfunctional family. Just your good old average American demographic mix, the type of people we meet every day."

"You're laughing at me."

I put my arms around her. "Never. I'm just looking at it in my usual hard-headed way. Never a word about ghosts until we move in, and then the one you see reminds you of a photo of your father in the family album."

"Maybe the remodeling disturbed a quiescent spirit who resented—"

"With those overcharges and delays, the only resentment should have been on our part. No, I'll tell you what I've been thinking. Suppose I offer to buy the house and you say no, so I decide to frighten you into selling. Now if the ghost of Aunt Jennifer showed up, you'd probably sit down for a long chat, but your father's?"

She spun and looked up at me. "But I saw—"

"—what you immediately identified as a photo. I know some primitive people feel that having their picture taken captures their soul, but this is a little too much. Sorry. I can't buy your father tapdancing his way through the ether with his Packard in the background. I don't know how it was done, but a trick makes more sense than a ghostly manifestation. You told me Eustace knew your family and that he made you an offer. Who else has those qualifications?"

She thought for a moment.

"Peter Taylor. He's my age, and his parents and mine were very friendly."

"Why would he want this place?"

"Buying old houses and restoring them for resale is what he does. And Del Savino asked what I intended to do. His mother worked for my parents. He's a lawyer now. I can't imagine any of them—what are you thinking about?"

"If one experience was enough to motivate you to sell, you should be calling them today to see if they're still interested. When our man doesn't hear from you, he'll assume you need another treatment."

She shuddered. "Faked or not, I'm not going through that again."

"No need. You won't be here. He just has to think you are. Two things to do. First, make sure Celia and Claude keep their mouths shut. Second, when some of our solicitous acquaintances call to find out what happened and how you are, tell them you had a horrendous nightmare and you're fine now."

"Suppose you're wrong. Suppose there is a ghost—"

"I have nerves of steel. I'll just ask my ethereal father-in-law how he managed to squander a fortune so fast."

*

Having spent my working career in the offset printing business, which is a photographic process, I had a fair idea of what might have been done. To satisfy myself that I was right, I drove into town, did a little shopping, and stopped by my plant. Billy, my young prep foreman, was one of the great experimenters of all time, some of his forays into better ways of doing things costing me money, others making up for it. I figured I was about even.

The two of us rigged it, tried it, grinned and high-fived each other when it worked.

"All right," said Billy. "Now what are you going to do with it?"

"Nothing. You can take it home for your kids."

Successful skullduggery is often the result of randomly acquired knowledge put to use.

At some time during those idle bits of useless conversation prevalent at dinner and cocktail parties, Marge must have mentioned her early-morning milk and cracker expeditions. Simple to check with little risk. Watch from somewhere safe, see the light in the kitchen go on, time it, note when it went off, and you'd know when to act.

It was a reasonable assumption that if you wanted to fright-

en someone into doing something, you'd pile one experience on top of another quickly so your victim would have no time to recover. My ghost-maker wouldn't wait. He'd act while Marge was still upset.

We smuggled her into Celia's house as soon as darkness fell. I returned and went through the normal routine of lights on in the den until bedtime, lights on upstairs for another half hour, then the house black except for the nightlights, which from outside weren't noticeable until your eyes adapted to the dark.

And outside was where I was at one thirty, having left by the back door and gone around to settle down behind a large rhododendron.

He arrived no more than fifteen minutes later, a dark bulk moving silently along the grass beside the driveway and taking up a position where he could see the side of the house and one of the kitchen windows. The soft glow of the undercabinet light Marge used while having her snack would tell him when she was there. And, when it went out, would tell him she was on her way upstairs again. No need to peer into the window like a peeping Tom. Even if he did, he'd have seen nothing because I'd drawn the curtains.

He couldn't know that tonight the light was working from a

timer I'd plugged in. Evidently I'd set it properly because after fifteen minutes or so he moved quickly to stand just off the flagstone step before the front door.

Suddenly dim light bathed the door, the photo of Marge's father projected on the etched glass. Someone on the other side of the translucent glass would see a hazy image—recognition coming more from memory than clarity or visual acuity—the image seeming to shimmer if shaken slightly. I knew because Billy and I had tried it.

And whether she hadn't heard it or remembered it, or he'd added a new touch tonight, a hoarse voice whispered, *Marge . . . Marge . . . Marge.*

He didn't even know I was there until I spun him to face me and hit him in the stomach with everything I had. He gasped and went down. I grasped him by the scruff of the neck, dragged him into the house, and hit the switches for the foyer and the outside lights.

He was in his late thirties, black hair, square face, dressed in a dark T-shirt and slacks, with something familiar about the eyes. I had no idea who he was.

The blaze of light brought Marge, Celia, and Claude charging into the foyer to stare down at him as he gasped for breath.

"Del?" Marge said it as if she couldn't believe it.

He managed to sit up, legs bent, elbows on knees, and hands clasped while he breathed deeply.

"Del," I said, "you should be able to talk now. Unless you begin, I intend to kick you in the lumbar region, which you will find extremely painful."

"Let me do the kicking, Norman," said Celia eagerly. "I'm wearing pointy shoes."

"Just call the police," he said.

"If I'd wanted the police in this, I'd have had a cop waiting." I knelt on one knee before him. "Pay close attention, Del. What you're dealing with here is a mean-spirited, conservative businessman totally lacking in compassion, so if you don't come up very fast with some sort of reasonable explanation for your ghost caper and an apology for my wife, I'm going to tromp you flat and throw you out into the road where hopefully a drunken liberal will run over you."

He didn't lift his head. "I have just as much right to live here as she does."

Marge stared at him.

"Celia," I said, "get your pointy shoes ready."

Celia drew her foot back. "Just tell me when, Norm."

He lifted his head and looked at Marge. "You're my half-sister."

She covered her mouth with her hands.

"Your Aunt Jennifer knew," he said. "She could have made things right, but she and your father were alike. Bluenoses. Refused to acknowledge the bastard kid."

Marge calmly stepped forward and held out her hand. He took it, and she helped him to his feet. He might have expected a sisterly embrace, but suddenly her eyes blazed and she was swinging with both hands, pounding him backward.

I grabbed her.

She began to sob. The facade had finally split.

"I've gotta hear the end of this," said Celia.

She and Claude hustled Del toward the kitchen.

I'd been right about the woman I'd married. She'd bend, but she wouldn't break. She calmed down in a few minutes, so I left her long enough to recover his ghost-creating instrument. Not much different from the one Billy and I had put together.

He'd converted a copy of the photo into a transparency and used it in a crude projector made from a high-powered flashlight, a cardboard mailing tube, and a couple of lenses. To focus, you simply moved backward and forward until the image was clear. A grade school science project.

His wouldn't even have earned the highest mark.

Not sophisticated enough to fool anyone who got over the initial shock but enough to frighten a woman who had repressed her feelings about her father for a great many years.

We sat him at the kitchen table and gathered around like a crew of detectives giving him the third degree, Celia looking as though she'd love to have a length of rubber hose to slap against her palm.

He'd grown up without knowing, he said. Whatever reason his mother had for telling him shortly before she died she took with her to the grave. Perhaps she wanted him to know why her husband had left her. She gave him the picture and told him who it was, along with all the subtleties of the family relationships, so he knew Marge hated her father.

They'd done him a great injustice, he felt. I couldn't disagree. What he intended was to force Marge to sell the house and then sue for his portion of the estate. I could only shake my head over that kind of convoluted thinking. No question his mind was a little disordered, even for a lawyer, but I was thankful it wasn't disordered enough to compel him to throw a firebomb through a window.

We'll see what can be done,

Marge told him. I knew she would. She was nothing if not fair.

We escorted him to the door, Celia mumbling he ought not be allowed to get away with it. If he'd done something like that to her—

Marge had her own ideas. At the door she suddenly slapped him with a roundhouse swing that sent him reeling.

"That's for scaring the hell out of me instead of coming to me like a man," she snapped.

Celia hugged her. "Together we can rule the world." She crooked a finger at Claude. "Come along, my lord. If your highness does but keep in mind what he has seen here tonight, he will preserve his well-being. The wrath of a good woman is not to be provoked, especially one who wears pointy shoes."

Marge worked it out herself, which in the end is what we all must do. The new half-brother she held in abeyance, the relationship with her father of greater importance.

She churned out a great many watercolors full of intense blacks, swirling purples, and dripping reds until she disappeared with her sketch-pad for several afternoons.

I looked over her shoulder a day later to see a serene land-

scape coming to life, the colors light and bright in her usual style, a lake in the distance. I couldn't place the scene until her brush dabbed in a spot of brilliant green that reminded me of Aunt Jennifer's burial dress. The day we'd buried her in the family plot alongside Marge's mother and father, I'd lifted my head and seen that lake.

That's where she must have spent those afternoons. I could have been wrong, but it seemed to me that while she would carry that scene in her heart, she would never have put it on paper unless she'd reached some sort of understanding with herself.

I settled down with the smug complacency and self-satisfaction I get when I believe I have my life under control, knowing damned well that something will reduce me to my usual quivering uncertainty within a few days.

I rolled over one night to find Marge off on one of her cracker and milk expeditions. My stomach transmitted a message concerning cold sliced chicken on warm toast slathered with mayonnaise. Half asleep, I stumbled down the dim stairs, turned toward the kitchen, and paused.

There was a soft glow coming from the front door.

Damn Del. I'd kill him this time.

I slammed the door open.

No projected image this time. The hair on my arms and the nape of my neck prickled, and my mouth went dry.

Surrounded by a white swirling mist like a figure in a Renaissance religious painting, the luminous image gave off a brilliant radiance, shimmering against the softness of the night as it hovered slightly off the ground.

I heard a soft gasp as Marge's warm body pressed against my side. I pulled her close, needing protection as much as she from whatever was out there.

The image lingered as my racing heart used up several years of my allotted life span; clear enough to note his cheeks glistening as though from tears.

I didn't give a damn. I wanted to kill him somehow. I wanted him and his tears gone. Forever. But how in the hell could I kill something I knew couldn't be real?

Marge suddenly stepped forward, her whisper as soft as leaves stirring in a night breeze, the words probably not uttered since she was five.

"Bye, Dad. Love you."

He suddenly smiled with a deep inner joy, his hand lifted in farewell, and he disappeared as though that was all he'd been waiting for.

I could only stare at the spot where he'd been. The only reason I could think of for those words was that at the graves she'd realized that fathers can be flawed, like the rest of us, and it was time to forgive.

Which might explain the words but not what I'd seen.

So I did what any sensible man does when confronted with the inexplicable.

I went in to make myself that chicken sandwich.

A cool, half-smiling Marge had to take over.

The hands of the man with nerves of steel were shaking too much to risk handling a sharp knife.

FICTION

BULLET FROM THE DARK

Kenneth Gavrell

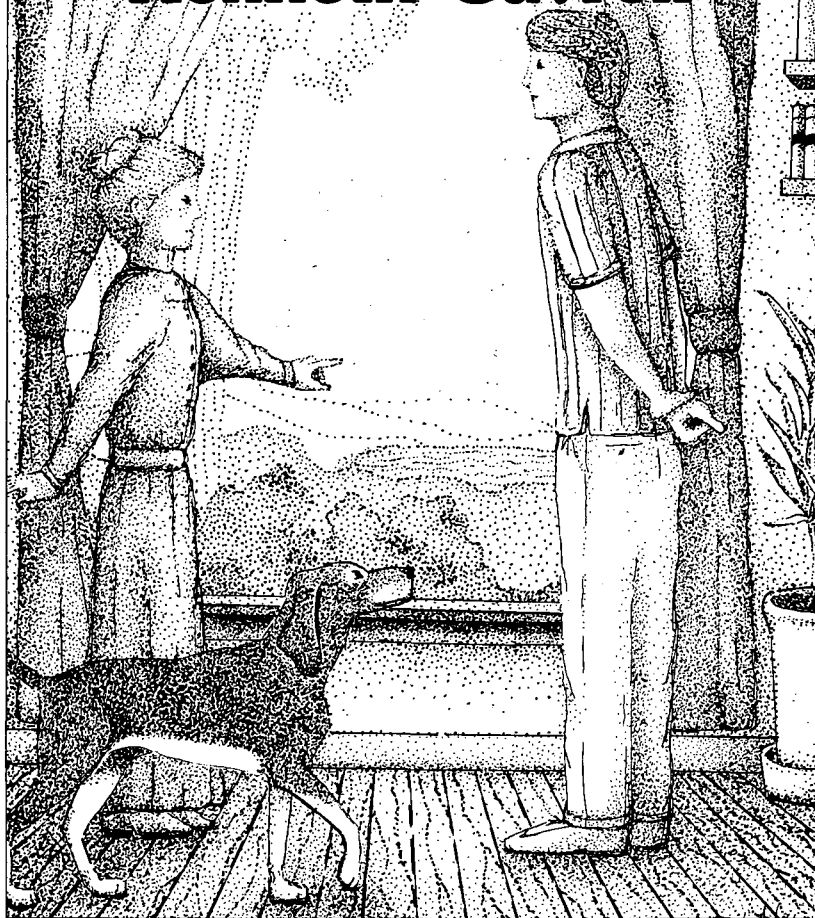


Illustration by Lisa Adams

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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It was not the best of times. For six months we'd had a drought in San Juan, and for three of them my building had been rationed to four hours of water a day. Now water service had been restored but at half pressure. If the toilet tank was filling, for example, you couldn't take a shower.

In addition to this annoyance, my apartment telephone line was apparently crossed. People who tried to call told me they got the answering machine of someone named Fernando. They said he had a nice voice.

And then there was the elevator. It had gone on the fritz on Friday (and so, naturally, wouldn't be repaired till Monday). The elevator wasn't dead; on the contrary, it never stopped working. For the whole weekend it had alternated between the ground and top floors, opening at each and then slamming its door to hurtle back through the shaft. The elevator from hell.

Situation a bit worse than normal for a Monday morning as I strolled into my office in the Condado. Maria, my part-time secretary, was dutifully typing on her word processor. Raul was on his way to the Judicial Center in Hato Rey. He gave me a bright "Morning, jefe."

I grumbled, "Bah, humbug," and headed for the coffee machine.

"Bad weekend, chief?" Maria asked.

"A trickle in the shower, an elevator that races like a demon in perpetual motion, and someone called Fernando answering my phone. No, it was a fine weekend, Maria."

"He has a nice voice," Maria said.

I poured some of her too-strong coffee. It smelled like coal tar and tasted like bitter disappointment. She quaffed her own contentedly, swushing it past her ever-present chewing gum.

"A lady just called. A Señora Vega. She sounds like a possible client." Maria pushed a scrap of paper displaying a phone number across her desktop. I picked up the paper and carried it and my coffee cup into my own office.

I noted that the rent in the seam of my swivel chair seemed to have grown over the weekend. I covered it with my tush and dialed Señora Vega's number.

She took a long time to answer, and when she did, her voice sounded old.

"I'm Carlos Bannon," I said, "the private investigator."

"Do you investigate murders?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes," I said. "But it's not what I do most of the time."

"My granddaughter was murdered," she said, then fell silent.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It was in the newspapers."

There are about four murders in the newspapers every day in Puerto Rico. We now lead New York City in homicides per capita. "When was that?" I asked.

"About a month ago. She was shot through our house window at night. The police think it was an unmotivated random shooting."

"I recall it," I said. "A house in the hills above Aguas Buenas?"

"That's right. Juanita wasn't even eleven years old."

"I imagine the police were right, Sra. Vega. It was probably some homicidal nut shooting a gun at a lighted window."

"I would like it investigated," she said. "I'm not satisfied."

I told her that I'd be happy to look into it, though I was not optimistic about finding anything. I explained my fees. She said they sounded reasonable. "How did you get my name?" I asked her.

"My lawyer recommended you. Hector Ortiz Villegas. He says he has worked with you."

"Yes," I said, "on two occasions. Hector's a good lawyer."

"What is your next step?" she asked.

"Our next step is that I meet you at your house," I said.

"I will give you directions."

She gave them, and as I'd feared, they were the kind of directions people give on the is-

land: "Go a ways past the *colmado* . . . turn at the *gallera* . . . look for the big flamboyant tree."

I told Maria I was going out for a drive in the country and left her a copy of Sra. Vega's phone number. "The old woman gave me *jíbaro* directions," I said. "If I don't show up in three days, have them send out a search party with plenty of brandy."

Maria laughed dutifully. She thought I strained too hard for humorous exit lines.

There's one thing to be said for a drought: you get nice bright days. I drove south on the old Caguas road past La Muda, then turned west into the hills past stands of bamboo, dried streambeds, the occasional rusting car, flaming flamboyants and African tulips, white egrets perched on the backs of docile cows. I found her *colmado* and the bar and the *gallera* and almost made it without getting lost. I missed the next to last turn, an almost imperceptible dirt road that descended from a curve and looked like a driveway. After ten minutes without a familiar marker, I realized I was lost indeed. I telephoned Sra. Vega from a gas station, and she directed me back to the dirt road I'd missed. It was a mess, half blocked at one point

by a fallen palm, and the next dirt road to which it led descended the hillside so abruptly that I was glad I was driving a relatively new car with good brakes. I eased down to a short driveway on the right that dropped to a two story house perched on the hillside. Four dogs barked at me as I pulled into the driveway and parked next to a bronze Mitsubishi minivan.

A woman in her late sixties appeared from the house and energetically dispersed the dogs. She puffed just as energetically on a long cigarette. Her hair was grey, her eyes sparkling black, and her dress dark blue. She looked like she'd got herself up for my visit.

The hand she held out to me was cool and leathery. She smiled me up a stoop and into the house, which was so narrow that as I walked in one side, I could see the green hills through the plate glass windows of the other. I was standing in a cluttered living room with dogs shooting past my legs. A younger woman suddenly emerged from a door to my right holding a dishcloth.

"This is my daughter Yolanda," said Sra. Vega. "The child's mother."

The daughter placed the dishcloth on a convenient shelf and touched her hair self-consciously as she greeted me. She looked

about thirty and about thirty pounds overweight for that age. But she had a pretty face, framed by short black hair. Short hair is not all that common with younger women in Puerto Rico. I smiled hello.

Sra. Vega said, "I've made coffee. How do you like it?"

"Leche y un poquito de azúcar," I said.

She went into the kitchen while her daughter and I looked at each other awkwardly. The older woman reappeared with three cups of coffee on a Chinese tray. She placed the tray on a rattan and glass table in the middle of the narrow dining area, and we took seats around the table. The coffee was much better than Maria's.

"I'm very sorry about your daughter," I said to the younger woman.

She nodded wordlessly.

"Your mother seems to think it was not a random shooting." I turned to Sra. Vega. "But surely you do not think someone intended to kill the little girl."

"No," the grandmother said, "but there were four people in this room that night besides Juanita—Yolanda, myself, my niece Miriam, and Yolanda's friend Esther."

"So you suppose one of the adults was the target, and the shooter missed."

"It seems a logical explanation," Sra. Vega said.

"Did you share your theory with the police?"

"Yes, but they did not seem much interested. They seemed to prefer the mad sniper theory."

Her daughter Yolanda rose from the table and returned in a minute with a plate of doughnuts. I declined. She took one sprinkled with powdered sugar and nibbled at it. It had purplish jelly inside.

"How many shots were fired?" I asked.

"Just one," Sra. Vega said. She took a fresh cigarette from a metal case and lit it with a little lighter.

"Did the police find the spot from which the sniper fired?"

"No—however, the angle of the bullet suggests it came from the left." She gestured vaguely out the window at the heavily wooded hills.

I could see that there were no nearby houses. In the far distance the green hills descended to the coastal plain. You could see San Juan and the ocean on the horizon. Normally the tropical vegetation behind the house would cover damp, if not muddy ground. The kind of terrain where it would be easy to find footprints. But because of the months of drought, it would be firm and dry and unhelpful.

"The type of bullet?" I asked.

"A .32 caliber fired from a pistol," the younger woman said. I realized it was the first time she had actually spoken since greeting me. It came as if she were reciting something from memory.

"Where was the little girl hit?" I asked as delicately as I could.

"In her chest," said Yolanda. "The bullet actually struck her heart."

The plate glass windows reached almost to the floor. With the darkness outside and the light inside, it would be like shooting at a bright target on a video screen. How could the killer have missed?

Unless he was at a great distance?

Unless he was extremely nervous or upset?

Unless he had bad eyesight?

Unless he was a rotten shot?

And why "he"? Women can also fire .32 pistols. But how many women snipers have there been?

"Where was your husband that night?" I asked Yolanda.

"Bowling with his league in San Juan. Saul bowls every Thursday night."

"And your husband?" I asked the older woman.

"Jaime has been dead for nearly ten years," she said. "Of lung cancer."

"Why would someone else

have been a possible target?" I asked either or both of them.

"I don't think anyone else was," said Yolanda. "It is Mother's theory. Mother watches too many mysteries on television."

I looked to her mother.

"I have my suspicions about Yolanda's friend Esther," she said. "I believe she is wild and has wild friends. She may be involved with drugs."

"You don't know that," Yolanda turned on her heatedly. "You are the one with the drug: your constant cigarettes."

"Esther doesn't go to church," Sra. Vega said. "She isn't a Christian. And her *boyfriend*—" She cut herself off as if she needn't even speak of his sins.

"You are a narrow-minded, bigoted old woman," Yolanda said. "Because Esther is unmarried and likes loud music and dancing, you presume she is a slut and a drug addict. She is a *graduate student* at the university like me!"

"Her boyfriend is a gangster." Sra. Vega remained adamant.

I changed the subject. "What are you studying at the university?"

"Education. I plan to be a teacher. That is where I met Esther."

"Does she also plan to be a teacher?"

"Yes."

Her mother mumbled some-

thing equivalent to "Bah, humbug."

"What about your niece Miriam?" I asked her. "Has she any enemies?"

"No," the old woman admitted, "but she has recently been divorced."

"There you go *again*," said her daughter. "What has her divorce to do with anything? You are a narrow-minded old woman."

"In my day we did not divorce," said Sra. Vega. "We had religion and traditions."

"And women were treated like housepets," Yolanda said.

"Not so," said the older woman. "But we knew our role."

I interrupted: "Was it a bitter divorce?"

"Her husband was an old fashioned type," Sra. Vega said approvingly. "He did not believe in divorce."

"I see." I got up and strolled to the plate glass windows. Not a cloud in the sky. Lemon trees, mango trees, orange trees, plantains. A good place for a survivalist. The nearest house I could see was well down to my left beyond a tiny, curved pool and a makeshift basketball court. Perhaps a quarter of a mile down the road.

"I see you have a pool," I remarked.

"Saul had it made for Juanita," the daughter said. "She loved to swim. Her two passions

were that pool and her collection of Barbie dolls."

"Who uses the basketball court?"

"That was there when we bought the house."

"Is that house down the hill your closest neighbor?"

"Yes—the Santanas."

"*Dominicanos*," grumbled her mother disapprovingly.

"Were they home on the night of the shooting?" I asked.

"Yes," said Yolanda. "The police talked to them."

"I'd like to talk to them, too."

"I will take you down," she said.

"And I'd like the addresses and phone numbers of your cousin Miriam and your friend Esther."

"Yes, of course."

She jotted the information down on a reminder pad and tore off the sheet for me.

"You have already done more investigating than the police did," her mother interjected sardonically.

"Some of the police are very good," I said. "I have some friends in Homicide."

"Those on this case were not good," Sra. Vega said.

"Well, let's take a walk down the hill," I said.

The four dogs accompanied us to the road, but Yolanda locked them inside the driveway gates.

The dogs accepted this with surprising stoicism.

The house at the bottom of the hill was a humble affair—perhaps three rooms, clearly built by amateurs, and built a long time ago. The Puerto Rican countryside is dotted with such houses, the land they're built on often acquired by squatters' rights.

The couple who came out on the porch in answer to Sra. Vega's call were mismatched, the man in his fifties, overweight and grizzled, the woman at least twenty years younger and still lean and attractive, though she had a browbeaten look about her. Behind them, a kid was screaming in the house.

"Angel's having one of his temper tantrums," the mother said. "He's home from school because he's very sick, but he still wants to shoot basketball."

She spoke Spanish with a Dominican accent.

"What does he have?" Yolanda asked with a mother's solicitude.

"I think it's a form of *la monga*. He has a high fever and no appetite."

The husband was regarding me with unconcealed curiosity. Sra. Vega made the introduction. "This is Sr. Carlos Bannon, a detective from San Juan. I

have hired him to investigate the death of Juanita."

The woman shook her head sadly. The man continued to regard me in silence.

"I understand you were at home at the time of the shooting," I said.

"Yes," said Sr. Santana.

"Did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary that evening?"

He shook his head no.

"A car, for instance," I prodded. "Did a car stop nearby or start up after the gun was fired?"

"I didn't notice," Sr. Santana said. "We don't pay much attention to passing cars."

I addressed the wife: "And you, Sra. Santana?"

She shook her head. The screen door burst open, and a boy of twelve or thirteen appeared. His eyes were red with crying. "I want to play!" he shouted.

"You will stay inside," his father shouted back.

"I want to, I want to!" screamed the kid as if he were about five.

"I'll show you 'want to'—" his father turned threateningly. The kid retreated through the screen door, but I could still hear him inside.

"He is crazy about the basketball," said his mother as if that were sufficient explanation.

"Since Angel is an only child, it relieves his loneliness."

"You want no more children?" Sra. Vega asked with the bluntness of the busybody.

"It appears I cannot have any." Sra. Santana shrugged her shoulders. "Alberto has three from his previous marriage, *gracias a Dios*."

"*Qué lástima*," What a pity, Sra. Vega said with consummate insincerity. "And your husband appears so robust for his age."

"There is nothing wrong with me, old woman," thrust in the husband.

There was another scream of protest from inside the house.

"Angel is very sensitive," his mother said. "Once, when his pet canary died, he carried on for days."

The kid was driving me crazy. I was anxious to get out of there. "Is there anything you can tell me that might help in investigating the little girl's death?" I asked the Santanas.

"It was a *loco*—a crazy sniper such as they have in the United States," the husband theorized. "Who would shoot a ten-year-old girl?"

"She was so pretty," Sra. Santana reminisced sadly. "Everyone loved her."

It occurred to me that I hadn't seen a photo of the little girl. But then, why would I need to?

"Juanita was sweet and smart and very popular at her school," Yolanda said. "A thing like this makes you wonder if there really is a God."

"How can you talk like that?" exploded her mother. "It's blasphemous."

Yolanda made no rejoinder. I thanked the Santanas for their time and started the two women up the dusty road like a dutiful sheepdog. On the way up, we passed the weed-grown basketball court. The basket had a rusted rim without a net and was set at least a foot below regulation height. It reminded me of the one we'd had in my back yard when I was a boy.

"What does Sr. Santana do?" I asked the ladies.

"He is a security guard at the factory," answered Yolanda. "He works nights."

"But he was home the night the shooting occurred."

"It was a Sunday—his night off."

"The wife works as a housemaid when she can find work," Sra. Vega interjected without much point.

It seemed to take a long time to reach their house. Neither woman walked very fast.

Esther Joglar, Yolanda's university friend, lived with another woman in an apartment in Rio Piedras. The apartments

near the campus were rented at outrageous rates on the presumption that students would share the cost. In this way, the owners of moldering old houses in the area had found the goose with the golden eggs. A three story house of three apartments could be redivided into nine, renting at three hundred dollars apiece—a tidy monthly total, probably tax free.

I figured my chances of finding Esther there were slim, but I figured wrong. She wasn't with her roommate; she was with a man whom she introduced as Pepe.

Esther was about the same age as Yolanda—a thin, sallow-skinned young woman in blue-jeans and a white T-shirt. The outfit emphasized her undernourishment. She looked worn.

I had to shout over loud rock music before it finally occurred to her to lower the radio. Her boyfriend, also in jeans and a yellow tank top, was a muscular brute who looked like he lifted weights.

I suggested we chat outside in the open-air hallway.

"I'd appreciate it if you could tell me anything you remember about the shooting."

"There's very little to tell," Esther Joglar said. "We were gathered around the dining table, drinking coffee. The little girl was playing with a Barbie doll

by the window—dressing it in some evening dress, as I recall. There was this loud noise, and at the same moment one of the sliding glass windows shattered and the little girl fell over. That was it. She was already dead when we lifted her from the floor. We saw nobody, heard nothing except the one shot.”

“What about a car? Did you hear a car drive up or drive away?”

“No. But we weren’t listening for one. After the shot, everyone was screaming.”

“You say the little girl was by the window, so she might very well have been hit by mistake.”

“You mean one of us was really the sniper’s target.”

“Possibly.”

“Who? Why?”

“It’s a theory of Sra. Vega’s. She pointed out, for instance, that her niece Miriam had recently gone through a bitter divorce.”

Esther thought about that but made no comment. I continued: “She even suggested that you yourself might have been the intended target.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Well, she made some comments about your acquaintances.”

Pepe, who had been listening in silence up to now, his thick arm around Esther’s negligible

waist, lowered the arm as if preparing to sock me with it.

Esther said, “The old lady presumes that anyone who likes hard rock is shooting heroin.”

“You don’t do drugs,” I said.

“A little pot—nothing strong.”

“But you have ‘acquaintances’?”

“That’s none of her business—or yours,” Esther said shortly.

I felt stupid so I pushed: “Dealers?”

“Hey, mister, it’s time for you to leave,” Pepe said, giving an unpleasant accent to the “señor.”

“But we’re just getting acquainted,” I said.

“You see this,” Pepe said, flexing his chest and shoulder muscles as if in a competition. “People who do drugs don’t look like this.”

“What about people who sell them?” I asked, obdurate in my stupidity.

That’s when he grabbed me by my shirt collar and almost tore it off. I could smell the garlic on his breath. “Get going,” he pronounced very quietly. He was nearly twenty years younger than me. I figured the time for stupidity had run out.

They didn’t say goodbye as I walked down the stairs.

It was after one o’clock, and I was hungry. The problem with lunch near the university was that there wasn’t one decent

place to eat. Only fast-food joints and greasy spoons. Yolanda's cousin Miriam worked in a place on Avenida Piñero. Between me and there was a Cuban restaurant called the Hipopótamo that was good.

At the Hipopótamo I ordered a wedge of tortilla española, fried squid rings, and a bottle of Beck's. The other tables were occupied by business types on their lunch break. The Hipopótamo had been a small, atmospheric place with hanging hams and a wall of wines in back, but it had recently become fashionable, updated its decor and expanded. Seedy looking intellectuals had been replaced by yuppies in suits and ties.

About an hour later I found Cousin Miriam's place of business: a narrow storefront with two parking spaces on the sidewalk and a sign that said *LICENCIAS* in huge red letters.

The front door wouldn't open unless you were buzzed in. Once inside, you saw two desks, a high stool, a camera on a tripod, and a couple of chairs to one side. This type of place specialized in getting driving (and other) licenses for people who were too timorous or too busy to brave a full day at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. They provided the forms, eye exam, photos—everything necessary—for forty dollars.

Such is enterprise these days in Puerto Rico.

Behind the nearest desk sat a woman in her latter thirties and in very nice condition. She was blonde, robust looking, and full-chested and had a winning smile that she displayed for me as I entered. Beyond her, a man in his sixties held down a second desk.

"*Buenas tardes,*" the blonde said. "*Una licencia de conducir?*"

I smiled back and explained that I wasn't a client—I was looking for Miriam Rodriguez. She looked surprised and said that she was Miriam Rodriguez.

"I'm a private investigator." I showed her my P.I. license. "I've been hired by your aunt to look into the death of Juanita."

She motioned me to sit down in one of the battered chairs against the wall.

"The police have concluded it was a random sniping," she said, "but my aunt refuses to accept that explanation."

"She seems to think one of the adults may have been the intended target. I don't know how else to put this: your aunt mentioned the bitter circumstances of your divorce."

Miriam Rodriguez just looked at me. It was as if this were too bizarre a notion to even consider—or perhaps only that it had never occurred to her.

"Manuel? She thinks Manuel was trying to kill me?"

"She's considering all the possibilities," I said.

"It's true that Manuel refused to cooperate in the divorce and is being an *hijo de puta* about it even now. It's true that he's unbelievably possessive. But I really don't think he'd go so far as . . ."

"Does he own a gun?" I asked.

"Well, actually, he has a gun collection."

"Registered?"

"I don't know," she said, perhaps truthfully.

"Is your ex-husband a violent sort?"

"We've had some bad fights," she said equivocally.

"Would you know if your ex-husband has a .32 caliber pistol in his collection?"

"I don't think Manuel did it," she said.

"Would you know where he was that night?"

"No," she said. "But I believe the police have talked to him."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"That day—the day of the divorce—in court. He calls up."

"Why does he call?"

"To try to get me back."

"Does he threaten you?"

"Really," she said, "I'm getting tired of this interrogation, Mr. . . .?"

"Bannon."

"An American name."

"My father was *norteamericano*," I said. "Where can I get in touch with your ex-husband?"

"If he knew I gave you the address . . ."

"His workplace. I'll say I got it from the police."

"Why don't you get it from the police," she suggested.

"All right."

All this while, the old man in back had been half watching us as he fiddled with a stack of forms, occasionally writing something. I couldn't tell if he could hear our conversation or not. I really didn't care.

"Is that all?" Cousin Miriam asked. Her grey eyes had a fine flash to them.

"A question or two more," I persisted. "Would you say your cousin Yolanda has a good marriage?"

"As far as I can see, a very good one."

"There is no friction between them?"

"All marriages have friction at times."

Tell me about it.

"But if they were in serious difficulties, you would know?"

"Women talk of these things much more than men do," Miriam said. "Really, Mr. Bannon, each theory of yours is more incredible than the last."

"I have to explore even remote

possibilities," I said. "That's what I'm getting paid for."

"Well, you earn every penny," she said. "By far the most likely theory is a deranged sniper. My aunt may be losing her senses, but that doesn't mean you have to as well. Yolanda's marriage is fine. Her husband Saul did not shoot his daughter by mistake."

"It does sound absurd when you put it that way," I admitted.

She smiled. The first time she'd smiled since I came in the door.

"Why not check the expiration date on your driver's license," she suggested.

I smiled back and pulled out my wallet. Cousin Miriam had psychic powers: my license was due to expire in less than a month. "All right," I said, "take your pictures and give me your forms."

I tossed her the old license, and for the first time the old man looked up with interest.

I couldn't make out two letters on the eye chart line, but Cousin Miriam didn't seem to mind.

I drove back to my office and found two phone messages on my desk left by Maria.

One of them interested me; it was from Lourdes Delgado, a very pretty woman whom I'd worked for on a recent case. I called her work number and got an invitation to dinner that eve-

ning at La Vaca de Oro, an Argentine restaurant in Isla Verde. I asked if this was business or pleasure and was assured it was pleasure.

There were no other calls on our new blue answering machine, which meant nobody had called since noon when Maria left. I dialed Homicide Division and asked for Roberto Burgos. He was in the office for a change.

"Hello, Carlos. What have you been up to?"

"My usual: racing yachts, the Riviera, beautiful women in gauzy harem pants."

"Just one beautiful woman is all you need," Roberto said sincerely.

"I have a dinner date with one tonight," I said.

"Good. Is that why you called: to give me the news?"

"No. To ask for your help, as usual."

"Which case is it?"

"A little girl killed by an apparent sniper near Aguas Buenas last month. Juanita Betancourt."

"I recall the case. What do you want me to look for?"

"Two things: I'd like to know if they verified the husband Saul's whereabouts at the time of the killing. I'd also like the work address of a Manuel Negron whom they interviewed."

"You surely don't think a fa-

ther murdered his own daughter."

"No, but he may have been aiming at someone else. I know how farfetched it is."

"You can say that again. Tell me, what does this woman look like?"

"What woman?"

"The one you're having dinner with tonight."

"She's about thirty-four with a perfect figure, light brown eyes, and long dark hair. She's a vision."

"Ah," Roberto said, "I envy you, my friend."

"Actually she's just an acquaintance," I admitted.

"Who knows?" Roberto said. "Anyway, I'll check the file on the Betancourt case and get back to you. You're at your office?"

"Yes. Thanks, Roberto."

I settled myself into my old chair to wait. About five minutes afterwards, Raul came in.

"What are you doing working so late?" I asked. "It's after three."

"I'm not working, *jefe*. I left my Walkman here."

He picked it up from Maria's desk.

"Jesus Christ, couldn't you live without it till morning?"

"I'm going jogging later, *jefe*. I can't jog without my Walkman."

"Did you have any problems

with the leads at the Judicial Center?"

"All routine stuff. Maria's putting it in the report."

"Well, enjoy your jog."

He waved his Walkman by way of goodbye. A dozen minutes after that the phone rang. It was Roberto Burgos.

"The husband was bowling with his league at an alley in Cupey. There are about a hundred witnesses. Manuel Negron works at the Arena Blanca Yacht Club in Boca de Cangrejos. He runs their fishing tackle shop. I also have his home address—do you want it?"

I wrote it down along with the two phone numbers. "Thanks a million, Roberto."

"Who hired you to look into the case?" he asked.

"The little girl's grandmother."

"Have you come up with anything?"

"Not yet."

"Well, good luck, Carlos. These are the hardest kind to solve."

"I get paid by the hour."

I hung up and went out to the car, and squeezed it into the traffic jam on Baldorioty. Baldorioty was the road to Boca de Cangrejos, but it was also the road to the airport and it was always tied up. Every improvement was obsolete by the time they finished it. Recently part of

the road had been elevated, but that hadn't helped much. Only a divine miracle would solve the traffic problems of San Juan.

It was about a quarter to four when I arrived at the yacht club. I got through the guard at the gated entrance by mentioning Manuel Negrón by name. He pointed out the tiny tackle shop and told me where to park the car.

Some magnificent boats were gleaming against the planked docks. There didn't seem to be one there that I could afford. Clearly I was in the wrong business. I walked through the screen door of the tackle shop into a sudden gloom cooled by an air conditioner that sounded as bad as mine. The place was maybe twenty-five feet by twelve. Most of it was devoted to spare parts for motors—there wasn't much fishing tackle. Behind a glass counter displaying marlin-size jigs was a heavyset black-bearded man in a tight ARENA BLANCA T-shirt and baggy pants. He looked younger than his ex-wife.

He got off his stool and asked what he could help me with. I showed him my license and told him Sra. Vega had hired me. He sat back down and definitely seemed less friendly.

"I don't know anything about it," he said. "I wasn't there."

"Where were you that night?"

"At home watching TV, like most other nights."

"Can someone verify this?"

He got up from his stool again. He was short and chunky, powerful looking. "Look, buddy, I've already answered questions for the cops. I don't have to put up with you."

"Your former wife mentioned that you own a gun collection."

"What about it? The cops have already checked it out."

"I suppose you're a pretty good shot."

"I'm an excellent shot," Manuel Negrón said. "If I was trying to shoot my ex-wife, I wouldn't miss."

"Stranger things have happened under emotional stress. A pistol's not much good at long range."

"Do you want to buy some tackle, Mr. Bannon?"

He caught me off balance.

"Do you need some repair parts for your motor?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, I don't have a motor," I said. "Or a boat to put it on."

"Then you're wasting my time and yours," Negrón said. "I'd suggest you find something better to do with your time."

"I thought I'd take up ballroom dancing."

"That's a good idea," he said. "You can start by dancing out that screen door."

"Well, you just have yourself a fine afternoon," I said.

I turned around and pushed through the door into the glare of the late afternoon sun. I could almost feel my pupils squeezing down. I got into my car and continued out the seaside road towards Loiza Aldea. About half-way there, I found a deserted stretch of beach and sat on the sand against a palm tree and wondered why I was provoking the people I was trying to get information from. What the hell was the matter with me? A huge tanker crept by on the very verge of the horizon. The shadows of the trees behind me lengthened, but I didn't feel like moving. It was very peaceful out there on that empty reach of beach.

At seven thirty I picked up Lourdes Delgado, and we drove to Isla Verde. La Vaca de Oro was a cosy place that appealed mostly to couples. A little pricey. Not surprisingly, their specialty was steaks. After dinner we drove to a coffee bar in Old San Juan that Lourdes liked. We sipped cappuccino and listened to guitar music. She seemed to be recuperating well from her father's tragedy. When I dropped her off, I told her I'd call her. I didn't try to pursue things—I don't know why. Maybe I was too wrapped up in the

Juanita Betancourt case. Maybe I was intimidated by how beautiful she was.

In the morning I telephoned Sra. Vega and told her what I'd done so far. She sounded pleased with all my activity—but disappointed with my results. I made myself an unusually hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs, then went down to the office.

Maria handed me an envelope that she said she'd found under the door. It was a plain white personal-size envelope, cheap quality, with just my name printed on the outside. I tore it open. Inside, folded twice like a letter, was a six by nine inch sheet of white paper, clearly from a pad. I unfolded it to read:

DEJA DE INVESTIGAR LA MUERTA
DE LA NIÑA.
HAS SIDO ADVERTIDO.

"Stop investigating the death of the little girl. You've been warned."

Shades of Saturday afternoon serials. Someone with a taste for melodrama. Someone whose printing wasn't very good and who hadn't even thought about cutting words from a newspaper. Would he have thought about fingerprints?

It looked to me like someone unsophisticated like Manuel Negron or Pepe the weightlifter.

Maria was regarding me quizzically.

"A love note," I said, returning it carefully to its envelope.

She didn't crack a smile. "The printing looks more like a man's," she said.

"It was shoved under the door?"

"I found it just inside," Maria said.

I nodded, poured a cup of coal tar, and walked into my own office. I closed the connecting door, pulled out the phone numbers I'd got from Roberto Burgos, and dialed Manuel Negron's tackle shop at the yacht club. He came on at the first ring.

"I received your note," I said.

"What note? Who is this?"

"This is Bannon."

"The snooper? What the hell are you talking about?"

"The little note you left me."

"You must be out of your ----- mind," Negron said.

"It's just a coincidence," I said. "I talk to you, you're uncooperative and hostile, next thing I get a note telling me to lay off the investigation."

"I'm tired of your ----- accusations," Negron said. "Excuse me while I hang up."

Which he did. He'd sounded sincere. This left Pepe. Did Pepe know how to write? It didn't seem likely. Well, something more to think about.

I stretched back in my chair

and put my feet on the desk. While Maria's coffee curdled my stomach acids, I ran through all of it again in my head: Negron, Pepe, the interviews, the alibis. All the things that didn't add up to anything until the note came. The note was very stupid. Without the note it had been a crazy sniper; now it was a purposeful shooting. Who had been dumb enough or ignorant enough or scared enough to write that note?

The police had given up too early. The grandmother's sixth sense had proved correct.

Thirty minutes later I opened my office door and told Maria I was driving over to Homicide Division.

"You be careful," she said as I headed for the door.

Had she held the envelope up to a light?

"Nothing to be concerned about," I said.

"You just be careful," she repeated.

The call I'd been anxiously awaiting from Roberto Burgos did not come until after four that afternoon. I climbed into my Toyota and ensconced it in the wall-to-wall traffic jam trying to leave San Juan. Things didn't loosen up until I was south of Rio Piedras. I turned up into the hills as I had the previous day. Young kamikaze

drivers hurtled around the curves trying to kill me. Two cars were parked right on the road, their drivers passing the time of day with people on the side, oblivious to the vehicles struggling around them. The side road down to the Betancourt house didn't look any less like a black diamond ski run.

I parked outside their gate, just off the road on a grassy spot under a blooming flamboyant. The house seemed preternaturally quiet in the late afternoon heat. The only sound was the bouncing of a basketball. It was coming from the cracked asphalt court below the house. I walked down to it and found the Santana boy shooting baskets. As I'd noticed before, there was no net and the backboard was made of weathered planks, but none of this appeared to bother him. He sank basket after basket. Even taking into consideration the less-than-regulation height of the rim, he was very good. I watched for a while before he noticed me.

"You'll be a professional," I said.

He looked at me, didn't say anything, kept shooting. Showing off now.

"You must be in better health than yesterday," I said.

He shook his head and kept shooting. I continued down the road to his parents' place and

found Sra. Santana pulling limes from a tree in her front yard. On the tiny porch her husband sat perusing a local gossip magazine.

"Señor Carlos," said the wife, clearly having forgotten my American last name.

"*Buenas tardes*," I said.

Her husband looked up from the magazine. He was wearing a sleeveless undershirt and plaid shorts, not particularly clean. "Have you learned anything?" he asked by way of greeting.

"I may have."

His forehead wrinkled at so ambiguous an answer.

"I will get you some coffee," offered the wife.

"No. Thank you," I said.

"A beer then," proposed her husband. He rubbed his palm against the stubble on his cheek.

I declined the beer also. Sra. Santana lifted the basket of limes she'd picked and carried it to the porch. "Such a pity," she said, genuinely grieved. "She was such a beautiful child."

"I imagine Angel must have had a crush on her," I offered.

She smiled. "Yes, he did. I suppose many of the boys did."

"Why are you here again?" asked her husband.

"To tell you an interesting story," I said. "I received a note today. It was not a pleasant note. The person who sent it apparently did not know much about

modern police methods. He didn't seem to know, for example, that they can take fingerprints off paper. In this case I took the note to the police, and in addition to my fingerprints, they found others—one of them quite clear—of someone else. Of course a fingerprint is of no use unless you can match it with a name."

I paused. Both of them were listening to me as if I were Scheherazade telling one of her best. They scarcely seemed to be breathing.

"Fortunately, the fingerprint was a perfect match to one they already had on file—a man who was arrested for drunk driving nine years ago. A local case."

Still not a word from either of them. "But I do not believe the man wrote the unpleasant note to protect himself," I said. "I believe he was trying to protect someone else. Someone who couldn't help himself—someone with severe mental imbalance."

Sra. Santana started to cry. The tears tracked silently along the sides of her nose.

"I posit a little boy in love with a little girl who did not return his affections. It needn't have been anything seriously sexual; since the boy is very sick, perhaps even the little girl's refusing to kiss him would have been enough. Perhaps she said cruel things to him because she didn't

find him attractive. We don't know exactly what occurred, do we?"

"He's sick," Sra. Santana cried. "Please—he has no friends. They call him odd!"

Her husband stood up from his rickety chair. I don't know what he intended to do next because at that moment Roberto and two other policemen pulled up in a prowler car across the road.

"There was enough information in the file on the drunk driving arrest to draw up a search warrant for this house," I said. "I hope you haven't been foolish enough to keep the gun around."

Roberto came striding up, looking ruddier than usual in the almost horizontal sunlight. "What a place to find," he said. "Without your directions I'd never have got here."

"The gringo half of me gives good directions," I said. "I've already told them about the warrant."

"Well, go to it," Roberto directed his troops as he held up the official document for the Santanas to see.

They found the gun in about two minutes. It was a Charter Arms Police Bulldog .32 H&R Magnum—the gun issued to Santana for his rounds as night watchman at work. It was so easy that Roberto thought there

must be another gun and kept his men searching. But they didn't find any other gun, and a later ballistics test showed this was the right weapon.

Towards the end of their search the boy came down from the basketball court. We could hear him bouncing the ball down the road. When he saw the police and the revolver in the plastic bag in Roberto's hand, he started to cry uncontrollably. He cowered against the wall of the house, trembling like an addict in detox.

I felt sorry for the Santanas, especially the mother. The boy would most probably be institutionalized.

When it was over, I shook hands with Roberto and tramped back up the hill to the Betancourt house. The sun had just dropped behind the hills, and darkness would fall fast. I halloed from the Betancourts' gate, and the dogs appeared as if by magic to hallo back at me. Eventually Sra. Vega emerged and opened the gate, shooing the canines away.

"How did you put it all together?" asked Saul Betancourt, whom I'd just met for the first time.

We were all sitting around the dining table, looking out at the dark hills.

"The threatening note put it together for me," I said, "but there were a lot of little things—most important, the boy's very strange behavior. His parents hadn't noticed any car on a road so little traveled, but they insisted on a random sniper. Did the sniper walk across those hills? They didn't really have their act together. Then there was the fact that the father worked as a security guard. The fact that all the other 'leads' seemed to lead nowhere. Even the fact that they'd had no more children. None of these things meant anything alone, but together they were very suggestive.

"But without that stupid, scared note we wouldn't have been able to do anything. You need a good reason for a search warrant. By trying to protect his child, Sr. Santana gave us perhaps the only way to get to him."

No one in the room looked very happy at our success.

FICTION

A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN THE VAST WASTELAND


Robert Loy



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


Awoman screamed, a door slammed, and I woke up.
I knew something—everything—was wrong as soon as I opened my eyes.

For one thing, the room and everything in it was unfamiliar to me. For another, I had a Godzilla-sized headache, and the loud, dramatic music coming from some invisible location felt like hammer blows to my temples.

But worst of all, there was a dead man lying crumpled on the floor, and I was crouched over him with a bloodstained crowbar in my fist.

I stood up to yell for help, but I couldn't. I didn't know anybody in this house. Not only that, but I didn't know how I'd gotten into this house, or why I was holding what looked an awful lot like the murder weapon.

I didn't even know who I was.

Oh no, I thought, I've got Indonesia . . . I—I mean, amniocentesis. Damn! What is that thing called?

Well, I might have had a monster headache and a black hole where my memory used to be, but I was still a lot better off than this poor guy. I'd have my identity crisis later; right now I had to see if there was anything I could do for him.

I dropped the crowbar and hurried down the plushly carpeted stairs of whoever's house this was. House? Make that a mansion. I must have run down a couple of hundred steps and then across a lavish hall at least as long as the Amazon before I finally found a phone.

I'm sure emergency operators must love calls from insomniacs. I couldn't tell her who I was or where I was. All I could say was that I was in a huge house and there seemed to be a lot of very tall pine trees in the front yard.

Fortunately this turned out to be enough.

"All right, Mr. Bowman, we'll have somebody out there right away."

I hesitated for several seconds.

"Oh, you mean me? Is that my name? Bowman? How do you know?"

She laughed—a little bitterly it seemed to me—and said, "Everybody knows you. You're the second richest man in Poplar Vale and an obnoxious, greedy leech. Or so I've been told, I was only married to you briefly."

I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. Maybe I'd lost my sense of humor, too.

After riding in the ambulance with the dead man to the hospital, I found some of my memory returning to me—but it was coming back in a trickle, not a torrent. The doctors and nurses all looked and sounded vaguely familiar, but like character actors from old B movies, all I could say for sure about them was that it seemed as though I'd seen them before.

The doctor in charge looked exactly the way TV has led us to believe doctors should look but never do. He was professional without being solemn, kindly without being cloying. He had lollipops as well as tongue depressors in his pocket, and I would have bet anything he probably slept with his white lab coat and stethoscope on.

"What happened, Blaze?" he asked after shutting the door and seating me on his examining table. "The ambulance driver says this horrible incident happened at your house."

He laid a friendly hand on my shoulder with just the right amount of pressure for just the right amount of time.

"That's my name? Blaze? Blaze Bowman?" That rang a bell but only a tiny one way off in the distance. Blaze Bowman? What kind of name is that? What am I? A fireman? An archer?

"Well, of course it is." The doctor's face could have served as a textbook illustration of concern and competence. "Are you feeling all right, Blaze?"

My plan, such as it was, was to try to conceal my ambrosia as well as I could until I learned who were my friends and who were my non-friends. But I hadn't really been doing such a great job at hiding it so far, and besides, this doctor just had such an aura of trustableness—if that's the word I want—about him.

"Well, actually, I seem to have lost my memory, Dr. . . . uh . . . Dr."

"Dr. Marshall, son. I've known you all your life. In fact, I delivered you right here in Poplar Vale Hospital."

"Poplar Vale? Is that the name of this town?"

The doctor nodded.

"What state is that in?"

"State?" My medical friend furrowed his brow. "What's a state? Oh, never mind, I suppose you're delirious. It sounds like traumatic automatism, probably the result of encephalitis," he said, shaking his head.

"What is that?"

He paused for several seconds before answering, "In layman's terms—amnesia."

There was that annoying, overblown music again. Where *was* that coming from?

"Amnesia! Of course, that's it!" I smacked myself in the forehead, setting off a major bomb blast in my cerebellum.

"Yes," the doctor said, "there seems to be a lot of it going around, even though it's not communicable. I want to be sure, though, so let's have a look at you."

He had just opened up his little black bag when a model-gorgeous woman burst into the room. It seemed to me—as impossible as it sounds—that she had opened the door with her breasts. Or maybe even with her hair. She had big billowing waves of remarkably well-behaved hair, hair a fiery shade of red that could only have come from a bottle and not a follicle. Her makeup was perfect, her pearls were perfect, she glided angelically on her high heels, and I just knew that displaying that much cleavage had to be against the law in a hospital or within a hundred yards of a heart patient.

I don't think it would be my usual reaction to a drop-dead gorgeous woman, but my first thought under the circumstances was fear. Maybe she was the dead guy's mistress, come for revenge. I looked over to the doc for some help, but he was busy taking my blood pressure and frowning paternally.

Whatever was on this femme fatale's mind, however, it was not revenge. She flung her lithe, perfumed arms around my neck and erupted into a typhoon of tears.

"Oh, my darling, my baby, my honey, my angel lamb. Are you all right? Tell me you're all right. I'll just die if anything should happen to you."

Before I could say, "I'm fine. Who are you?" she was branding my face with her lipstick, the same flaming shade as her hair.


Then she tore herself away, dabbed at her eyes, and made a gallant dramatic effort to gather herself.

"Blaze, darling," she said, "there's something I have to tell you. Something I never told anyone. Something I probably should have told you a long time ago."

That damn music from the *Jaws* soundtrack started up again. I'd thought they only had Muzak in hospitals. Dr. Marshall evidently didn't hear it. He was listening so intently through the stethoscope he must have been trying to track down my missing memory in my chest cavity.

"What is it?" I asked her.

Twin black rivers of melted mascara rolled down her cheeks, but



on her it looked good, so sexy, in fact, I could easily see how mascara streaks could be the next big fashion fad. My visitor gave a histrionic inhalation, looked up to the ceiling for courage, turned to me, opened her mouth, then closed it and just stood there like that for a good minute at least.

Just when I was beginning to think that maybe amnesia was contagious after all, and she had caught such a bad case she'd forgotten how to use her larynx, she blurted out:

"Pierre Courtship is your . . . your father. Oh, sweetheart, honey, darling, can you ever forgive me? It was just a silly fling in between my sixth and seventh husbands. It meant nothing, and when Falcon agreed to marry me and raise you as his own son, I almost forgot about it until—"

"That's Veneezia Breckenridge," Dr. Marshall whispered to me in the middle of this monologue. "She's one of your mothers."

"One of? How many mothers do I have?"

"Three, but one of them, poor Silverado Bichette, is dead now," he said.

Before I could ask him how I came to be so maternally blessed, a guy about six foot four with long wavy blond hair kicked open the door and strutted in. He looked like a rock star, with the hair and the earrings, or he would have except that he was in such glowing good health that his skin literally shone. That plus the fact that he was wearing a policeman's uniform. A skintight policeman's uniform unbuttoned to the bottom of his breastbone.

"Mr. Bowman," he said, talking to me but sending smoldering sidelong glances at my mother, "I need to ask you a few questions about Pierre Courtship's death."

"Pierre Courtship? Is that the name of the guy who died?" People here, including me evidently, had such unlikely and unlovely names. "Are you sure?"

Just like Veneezia, whenever I asked this guy a question he stood there looking at me for several seconds before he answered. He didn't seem to be thinking or anything—he was just hesitating.

Finally he said, "Of course I'm sure. Everybody in town knows Pierre Courtship. He's the richest man in Poplar Vale and your biggest business rival. And we all know that you never forgave him for stealing your seventh wife, Stream."

This rock-and-roll cop also seemed vaguely familiar, like someone you know only in a dream. I still had no idea who I was, but I was

getting the distinct impression I was up a deep, stinky creek, completely paddleless.

"Everybody knows all that except Blaze, Pythius," explained Dr. Marshall. "I'm afraid he's got amnesia."

"Damn it! Again?" Officer Buff Bod glared at me. "What's so funny?"

Well, I was laughing at the name Pythius, but I thought it was probably the better part of valor not to mention that.

"I . . . uh . . . I forgot," I told him.

"Well, I'm going to have to take you in," he said, and wrenched my arms behind my back and slapped handcuffs on my wrists.

"Is this really necessary?" asked Dr. Marshall.

"Oh yes, it's necessary," said Veneezia, never taking her eyes off Pythius's pectoral muscles. "I saw Blaze kill Pierre Courtship. I'm an eyewitness."

"Hey!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey baby boy, I didn't want to tell them. But I just couldn't hold it in any longer. It was driving me crazy."

Thanks, Mom.

"Oh, darling, don't worry," she sobbed. "Everything will be fine on Monday, I just know it will."

"This isn't easy for me, you know," the rock-and-roll cop said to Dr. Marshall. "There's something I never told anybody. But Blaze Bowman, the man who stole two of my wives and my publishing empire is my—" long silent dramatic pause here, of course "—he's my father."

Oh brother.

Ironically, they released me on my own recognizance.

Not for long, however, as my trial was set for nine o'clock the next morning, justice being extremely swift if not altogether sure here in Poplar Vale.

I had no idea where to go next or what to do, so I just walked over and sat on a wooden bench out in front of the jailhouse. The way things were going I figured I wouldn't have to wait long for something to happen.

I still had nothing like what you could call a memory, but I was getting clearer and clearer glimpses of another reality. Visions of a much more peaceful existence than the crisis-a-minute one I found myself in now. And a very blurry recollection of falling headfirst off

a wet stepladder. Was that real? Was that how I got this bump on my head?

Was it possible that what I was suffering from was not amnesia but something else? Something eerie and other-worldly? Or maybe I'd been killed in that stepladder fall and Poplar Vale was actually heaven—well, not heaven but some fast-paced purgatory.

Or maybe it wasn't just my memory, maybe I'd lost my mind altogether. Maybe I was insane.

A candy-apple red Corvette careened around the corner, ran a red light—for a minute I thought she was going to run over me, and my reflexes were so rusty I couldn't even get out of the way—and screeched to a halt, half on the sidewalk, half on the grass in front of me.

"Come on, get in," said a blonde with sunglasses and a figure I would have thought impossible outside of Hugh Hefner's airbrushed fantasies. "My reputation's already shot, so it ain't gonna matter if people see me with a convicted murderer."

"I haven't been convicted," I told her.

"No, not yet, but it's just a matter of time. I think you should know that your mother came by unexpectedly for lunch this afternoon, and while I was searching for the arsenic, I saw you kill Courtshipp and I'm going to testify to that effect," she said as she took off her sunglasses and turned her deep green eyes toward me. "I told you I'd get even with you for stealing my fortune and having affairs with my mother and my sister while I was in Paris with amnesia. Sweetheart."

Now it was my turn for the long silent dramatic pause. Actually, I think I was better at the LSDP than anybody else in town. I mean, my heart didn't even beat.

I knew who this woman was.

She was Tigré L'amour, Blaze Bowman's fourth, ninth, and (currently, I think) eleventh wife. She had tried to kill him four different times and was even successful once, but they never recovered the body from the bomb blast and Blaze returned a year later sneakier and meaner than ever but with a brand new plastic-surgerized face and a slight case of traumatic automatism.

As soon as I realized who she was, I remembered who I was, and I faced the fact that my problem was a lot stickier than mere memory loss or simple schizophrenia.

Tigré was a character on a soap opera my roommate in college used to watch every afternoon. *Secondhand Woes* I'm pretty sure it.

was called. I never got interested in it, but it always seemed to be playing while I was trying to study, and I had absorbed a lot of its ludicrous lore by osmosis. The actress who played the part had also done a few made-for-TV movies and was somewhat famous for never winning a daytime acting award, despite several nominations.

This was not the actress, though. This was Tigré herself in the oh-so-curvaceous flesh. Which meant that somehow I had taken a blow to the head and landed in another dimension—a real live soap opera.

Tigré was yammering away about how much she hated me and how she was going to see to it that I was put away, but I only half heard her. I was trying to hold on to the shreds of my sanity. How in hell did I get here and how was I ever going to get back to reality, my reality?

Wait a minute. Didn't this—hadn't I heard about this—something like this—before?

Yes, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. I read that book for a ninth grade book report—

No, dammit, I just read the back cover and the first twenty pages. But wasn't it a blow to the head that carried the Yankee from Connecticut to Camelot? Yes, yes, I was sure it was. Now, if only I could remember how he got back.

He did get back, didn't he?

"Shut up and scoot over," I told Tigré, then got behind the wheel of my Corvette. I headed the car in the direction of what I hoped was home. Poplar Vale had an interesting layout. In this block, a hospital, a police station, a nightclub, and a mansion. On the next block, another hospital, police station, nightclub, and mansion.

"I have a confession to make," Tigré said.

"Let me guess," I said, checking the mansion on this block for the pine trees I remembered covering the front lawn of mine. "You're really my sister."

"No, I—"

"My brother?"

"I never loved you, Blaze. Never. Not for one minute during all the times we were married. I don't love you now. I'm just staying with you for the sake of the children."

"We have children?"

"Well, of course we—" she turned, puzzled. "Don't we?"

On the fourth block I scanned I found my mansion. Unfortunately, it was completely wrapped up in yellow POLICE LINE DO NOT

CROSS tape. I didn't know if that warning applied to everybody, even the owner of the property, but decided that it probably wasn't too smart to return to the scene of the crime like this and headed for the next block.

I dropped myself off at a place called the Conifer Motel and told Tigré I was sorry about her mother and everything and she could keep the Corvette.

Once checked into my room and away from Tigré's constant critiques of my character, I picked up the telephone book. If I got here by metaphysical means, then what I needed was somebody who knew metaphysics to help me get back home. But the Poplar Vale yellow pages yielded no astrologers, no numerologists, no fortune-tellers—not even a phrenologist. Nothing at all new-agey.

Well, all right, I thought, let's switch to Plan B. I had to get my hands on a copy of Mark Twain's book and find out how the Connecticut Yankee managed to find his way home.

But there were no libraries or bookstores or even newsstands in the phone book.

There were no plumbers or gas stations or grocery stores either.

Nothing but page after page of attorneys, doctors, and private detectives.

Okay . . . Plan C, then. If a bump on the head sent me here, maybe another bump on the head would send me home. Might as well try it. My head was still aching so bad that I didn't see how another knot on the noggin would make much difference.

I scanned the sparsely furnished room, but the only hard object there was the ceramic lamp on the bedside table. I grabbed it and held it over my skull, closed my eyes—then chickened out and set it back down on the table. The way my luck was going I'd probably just end up with a fractured skull.

This couldn't be happening. I could not be stuck here in the Soap Zone. And not only that but soon going to be stuck behind bars. I wondered how long they would give me for murdering my father-rival? Maybe I should plead not guilty by reason of insanity. This whole town was crazy, but—

No, I couldn't think like this. I didn't kill anybody. And I wasn't going to jail. There had to be a way out of this mess. I just had to think. And since I was in Poplar Vale, I probably needed to think like a Poplar Valian.

It hurt my head to think at all, much less about the peculiar sociology of soapland, but I sat down and meditated for a few minutes

on what kind of person I would be if I had lived my whole life in the thrill-packed little town of Poplar Vale. From somewhere out of the tangle of the big hair, the exotic names, the annoying music in the air, the long dramatic pauses, the millionaire industrialists who were somehow always too busy with marriages and affairs and divorces to actually go to work, the doctors, the lawyers, and the vixens, I found the answer.

At least I hoped it was an answer.

I picked up the phone book from where I had flung it, chose a private detective at random—Galahad Ferrara by name—called him up, told him who I was and who really murdered Pierre Courtship, told him that if he would just convey that person to the courtroom tomorrow morning he could name his price.

Next morning I was there in court with my attorney—Liberty Presley. There was a huge hungry-looking crowd on hand obviously hoping to be called as character witnesses so they could tell the world what a lowdown conniving skunk I was. I wondered how many of them were ex-wives of mine. Or mothers.

The private detective I'd hired was nowhere in sight.

Veneezia and Tigré both testified that they saw me kill Pierre Courtship with a crowbar blow to the cranium. Mrs. Courtship, a slinky blonde in a sequined gown, testified that I'd hated her husband for years and threatened his life on a regular basis.

After talking it over, my attorney and I had decided not to bring up the amnesia thing, since we didn't see how it could possibly help our case, so about all we could do now was sit there at our little table and look stupid.

"Mr. Bowman, have you anything to say before I announce the verdict and pass sentence?" asked the judge.

Phrased that way it wasn't hard to figure out what the verdict was going to be.

"Yes, Your Honor, I do," I stood up and told her. I hoped—prayed—I was still thinking like a Poplar Valian. "I did not kill Pierre Courtship. But I know who did."

I waited until the piano chords this pronouncement set off had died down.

"And there he is—" I turned and gestured grandly at the big wooden double doors at the rear of the courtroom.

The big shut wooden double doors.

Oh God, this had better work.

Sure enough, after a suitable but not too long dramatic pause the door burst open and Galahad Ferrara came in practically dragging a man, a man who looked just like me.

"There's the real murderer, Your Honor," I said. "My long-lost evil identical twin brother."

Gasps and excited murmurs from the crowd.

"But, darling, honey baby, how on earth did you know you had a brother, much less an evil identical twin one? I've never seen or heard of him before," said Veneezia, reluctantly tearing her gaze away from the diamond engagement ring my arresting officer had just given her.

"Me neither, Mom, but it's the only thing that made any sense. I knew I didn't kill him, but you and Tigré had both seen me do it. Therefore, there was only one possible explanation. I had to have an identical twin, and obviously, seeing as how I've never heard of him and he's a murderer, he must be a long-lost evil one."

"You're a genius, my love," said Tigré, who appeared from nowhere and started planting extremely unjudicial kisses on my lips. "You know I love you and always have. Let's go home and make some more babies—or our first baby—whatever."

"Well," said the judge to my evil identical twin brother. "So you murder a man and try to frame the twin brother who is totally ignorant of your existence for the crime. I have never heard of anything so heinous. Take him away, boys."

Two Fabio-wannabe guards or bailiffs or cops or somebody with guns and nightsticks dangling off their midsections stepped out of the shadows and grabbed my twin.

Hey, wait a minute. An alarm went off inside my still-aching head.

Nightsticks.

It was a long shot but—

"Your Honor," I shouted over the still-hubbubbing crowd, "I can't go through with this. My evil identical twin brother didn't kill Pierre Courtship."

Long dramatic pause.

"I did."

More gasps and excited murmurs from the crowd. A slap in the face from Tigré.

The judge did a dramatic pause of her own, then nodded at the guards or whatever they were. They dropped my L-LEITB and ad-

vanced toward me. I waited till I was sure they would have no problem catching me, then took off running down the aisle.

I didn't even get to the door before one of them grabbed me and pulled my right hand behind my back. Praying that the C in Plan C didn't stand for concussion, I guided my balled-up left hand toward the chin of the guard in front of me.

It connected, and just as I'd hoped, he pulled out his nightstick and conked me a good one right on top of my skull.

So far, so good.

I was almost afraid to open my eyes when I came to. But my plan had worked. I was no longer in Poplar Vale. I was on a suburban street, a quiet suburban street with no mansions. It wasn't my suburban street, but I knew it wouldn't be hard to get there from here.

I was looking up and down the road trying to decide which way I wanted to go when a boy and a girl, both about sixteen years old and wearing semi-matching flowered polyester shirts, came bounding out of a split-level house.

"What are you doing in the middle of the street, Dad?" asked the boy.

"Yeah, what are you, a road scholar?" said the girl, and then I felt this great brain-rattling noise. I was still kind of dizzy, and I couldn't tell if the sound came from the sky or my head.

I turned around to see who in the world these two teenybopper pinups could be talking to and realized with a start that it must be me.

"Oh no," I said. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong . . . I'm not . . ."

"Come on, Dad, the bus is all packed, and we're ready to go." The girl grabbed my arm and led me up the driveway, where before I knew what was happening a great big slobbery cute dog was standing on his hind legs licking my face. Then all of a sudden, like Dorothy in Munchkinland, I was surrounded by chattering, giggling little people.

They were all jumping up and down and calling me Dad. They ranged in age from probably about four to about eighteen, an even mixture of boys and girls, and they were all dazzlingly white-toothed and incredibly, obscenely cute.

"Look, Dad, isn't it groovy?" A little redheaded boy about ten pointed to a purple schoolbus adorned with gigantic yellow flowers and other antiseptically psychedelic swirly designs. There was also a recreation of an album cover showing me holding a guitar sur-

rounded by this winsome brood and grinning like a fool. "The Finch Family Featuring Their Smash Hit 'Love in 31 Flavors.'" A sign in the back window of the bus read HITSVILLE OR BUST!

"I put all the stuff we won't need underneath the bus in the storage compartment," the redheaded boy said.

A blond boy of about six popped up from behind a drum set. "Yeah," he said, "but I escaped."

There was that noise again. It was even more annoying than the melodramatic strains in Poplar Vale. It sounded like the gods were giggling at me.

Oh my God. It's a laugh track.

The realization started in the pit of my stomach and shot up the back of my neck to my brain.

No, no, it can't be.

But I looked down at the wide lapels and bellbottomed pants I was wearing. It was true. That knock on the head had thrown me out of the Soap Zone, all right, straight into an even more nightmarish realm. And there would be no way out of this one. No evil twins, no murders.

I was a prisoner in an early seventies situation comedy.

I walked over to the side of the house and started beating my head against the bricks. I knew it probably wasn't going to magically whisk me out of this nightmare and back to my safe, sane home in Hartford or even back to Poplar Vale, which was looking better and better all the time—beautiful women, no polyester.

No, all I was hoping for was a break. I just wanted to be unconscious again for a little while.

Like, say, until after bellbottoms go out of style and this mob of moppets is out of adolescence.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Three, four, shut the door. . . . We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "July Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

War Stories: Righteous Shoot

Bill Crenshaw



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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The day before the Wiz left his shield and gun on the captain's desk, we threw him a party at Smitty's Bullet to celebrate the no bill from the grand jury in the Whitman shooting.

I'm at Smitty's by five thirty, and I don't see anybody except Lydia. I say, Hey, Six, you're looking good, where is everybody, and she gives me a hug and tells me Snapper's in the john and that Petey said she and Cicero would for sure be there. "I thought you weren't coming," Lyd says.

"I got off early," I say. "Does Hatch know?"

"Know what?" she asks, and I know she's playing with me, and she knows I know.

"What's this 'got off early' stuff, Tabby?" she says. "That's pretty lame."

"Yeah, well, the more I thought about it, the more I thought I needed to come."

"How long since you've seen him?"

"To talk to?" I haven't seen Hatch, the Wiz, since I got promoted and went inside. "A year. Almost a year."

"I told him you'd be here," she says.

"Trying to scare him away from his own party?"

"He wouldn't have come otherwise: I told him, Come on down to the Bullet, I'll buy you a beer.

He begged off, like you, so I told him it was his welcome back party. He asked if you were coming. I told him yeah, I thought. He said he'd come. He'd try."

I look at her. "You knew I'd come."

She just gives me her smile.

I see Snapper coming out of the john. "So," I say, "do we still say 'Surprise'?"

"Nobody else knows he knows."

And then Snapper is pumping my hand, calling me sergeant, and Petey and Cicero come in, and we push a couple of tables together and pull up two empty chairs for Wizard and Pepper, his current partner, who's supposed to get him down to Smitty's on time. Lyd asks if I know Pepper.

"I know of him. Any good?"

"He's a little excitable. You know, still enthusiastic. You remember when you were still enthusiastic?"

"I think I was a rookie."

So we get up a pool on when they'll show, a buck each under the green candle glass. Lyd takes the earliest time because she sees Pepper as enthusiastic, but we think he's just a rookie.

I see Smitty circulating, smiling and crushing hands and calling us by name. Smitty's is a cop bar where you can feel okay about sitting with your back to the door, and Smitty is an ex-

cop himself with bullet fragments in his spine that will put him in a wheelchair if he turns wrong or sneezes too hard, so his ritual is to arm wrestle new customers and he'd better not catch you letting him win. He doesn't water his drinks, at least not for cops, and sometimes his tabs are a drink or two light, especially if you're a street cop with a good war story. All war stories are true, he says, as long as you don't confuse truth with fact.

He gets to our table and throws his arms up like he's surprised. "Tabby," he bellows, clamping down on my hand with both of his, and I know I'm in trouble. He's going to rag me about taking the inside job, which today I'd rather not mention.

"Hello, Smitty," I say.

"So, Mister Bigshot, where you been keeping? *Sergeant* Bigshot, I apologize. A little promotion and suddenly you're too good for the flatfeet?" He winks big, looking around the table. "With his raise, he should buy the first round, you agree?" They agree. He swivels his head back to me, still mangling my hand. "You agree, Mister Sergeant Talbot?" His eyebrows arch, all bush.

"I agree," I say.

He laughs. "A boss and still a good man. Go figure."

So they call me sarge and give

me grief about being a desk cop and I buy the first round, beer for Cicero and Petey and Snapper and me, a shot and a beer for Lydia. Smitty brings the round over, and we toast the Wiz, a cop's cop, and the clean shoot, and justice. We clink our mugs and Lydia's shot glass. We've been with the Wiz on and off for seven years, since the academy, and we want a quiet celebration without station-house hoopla—no speeches, no gags, no bosses or brass, just old friends and partners hoisting a few, saying welcome back. Tonight I'm not a sergeant and Petey isn't crime scene; tonight we're all street cops again, the thin blue line between the bad guys and everybody else, downing beers and swapping war stories about the Wiz and the early days when we were all on patrol together, all rookies, young and unmarried, in great shape, everything bright and clean and uncluttered.

Eventually it starts to sound like a wake.

"Hey," Snapper says, "he's not dead."

"More like he's back *from* the dead," says Petey. "Or back from hell."

"Yeah," says Lydia. "I mean, can you imagine? What, six weeks off the job? Six weeks of hearings and Drummond and

the pricks at IAD? He's got to be nuts by now."

"Or rusty," says Petey.

"I bet he's fine," says Snapper. "He's the Wizard."

"Wizard or not," I say, "he could maybe use some transition time."

"Yeah," says Cicero, "such sensitive bosses. They feed him to IAD, they drop him into the grand jury, then—no indictment? Wham! Back to work!"

Then the door opens and we see them silhouetted in the sidewalk's concrete glare, Pepper's arm crooked around the Wiz's neck. "Just one quick one," Pepper is saying, laughing and bouncing like a kid. Six pockets her winnings. Smitty starts drawing two more beers.

Pepper steers Wiz over, but it's dim and he's still sunblind. Then Lydia says, "Surprise!" and we stand and say "surprise" and applaud, and so do cops around us, and Wiz sees who we are. I stick out a hand and say, "Welcome back, Hatch," and he pulls me into a bear hug. He feels thin. We get handshakes and hugs all around, backslaps and shoulder punches, and Smitty brings their beers over and Pepper bangs on his mug with a nickel, and when it's quiet he presents Wiz with a little homemade wooden plaque on which he's lacquered the headline OFF-DUTY COP SHOOTS COP-

KILLER. "Well," Pepper says, proud and embarrassed in the silence. "Well." He lifts his beer. "My partner—the hero," he says, and we all toast Hatch again, the Wiz, this time in person.

So we're standing there, loud and awkward, wondering what to say next or what to ask. Pepper asks if it will be good to saddle up again, which is a real Pepper phrase, and Wiz nods and smiles and says yeah, it'll be good to saddle up. We laugh and sit down.

"Are you ready to get back?" Lydia asks.

"You kidding?" says Pepper. "Tell 'em what you been doing." Wiz looks at his hands. "Museum guard," Pepper says, and laughs. "You believe that? The Wiz in a museum. But it's the Street tomorrow, partner. The real thing."

We toast the Street.

"But you'll need a new partner," says Petey to Wiz, and Pepper's head whips around and I can see what's coming. "Pepper here's riding with LaBlount."

Pepper flares up, like Petey knew he would. "He's not my partner. He's got four months until retirement. He cuts the radio down, all the way down, we don't hear anything. We ride down the street, he doesn't see anything. I say, 'Hey, that guy maybe fits the purse-snatch de-

scription,' he says, 'What guy?' He's got this alley he pulls into for naps. I got two years on the job, and he calls me rookie." He's looking at Wiz.

Wiz strokes his chin. "Riding with LaBlount."

"He's not my partner," Pepper says. He sounds desperate.

The Wiz looks around the table like he's surveying potential partners.

"This isn't funny," says Pepper, and we all laugh, finally even Pepper, looking relieved.

"So how are you?" I ask Wiz.

"Good," he says, shrugging. "I'm good."

"How's the eye?"

"It can see you haven't gotten any prettier."

Lydia laughs. Snapper says he should see me in sunlight.

"Anybody apologize?" I ask.

He looks at me. "Like who?"

"Drummond? Marconi?"

"Right, that prick," says Pepper.

"The captain did," says Wiz.

"Our captain?" says Lydia. "You mean *our* captain?"

"Drummond's the one should apologize," says Petey.

"Marconi should be shot," says Pepper.

Wiz slices the air with the edge of his hand. "Marconi's fine. Marconi's okay. IAD's doing their job, that's all."

"It never should have gone to the grand jury," says Snapper.

"The scene spoke for itself. Clean shoot, absolutely clean. All you had to do was look."

"I heard that the shooting board and IAD wanted to go clean shoot weeks ago," says Cicero. "I heard Drummond sat on the report." Cicero looks at me like he expects me to know something, since I'm inside. I shrug.

"So what's Drummond's problem?" Snapper says.

"He wants to be D.A.," Lyd says. "If that means taking a cop down, he'll do it."

"Yeah, well," Pepper says, "he picked the wrong cop. To the Wiz."

"The Wiz," we say and raise our glasses.

The Wiz looks uncomfortable. "So how was your week?" he asks.

He wants to hear our stories. We want to hear his, about what happened out there, and IAD, and Drummond, and I want to figure out how he's really doing and what he thinks he's going to do next. But he's been off the job a while and maybe he needs to hear our stories before he tells his.

We keep it light. We tell stupid-perp stories.

Cicero's stupid perp is a girl who capped her honey. "Twice to the back of the head. Claimed he shot himself. I ask her just how did he do that, and she

says, 'Like this,' " and Cicero twists a finger pistol upside down and backwards behind his head and drops his thumb once, twice, then gives wide eyes. We crack up.

Lyd has a drug bust. "We finally got a warrant on a crack house we'd been watching. So, at like five thirty A.M. we're on the front porch. We gain access to the house . . ."

"They kick in the door . . ." Snapper says.

"We I.D. ourselves . . ."

"They yell POLICE before the door hits the floor tile . . ."

"We inform them of the nature of the warrant . . ."

"They yell GIVE IT UP, SLIMEBALL . . ."

Lyd is trying not to laugh. "We place the suspects under arrest . . ."

"They slam the skulls against the wall and yell YOU'RE BUSTED, SCUZZ."

Everybody's laughing.

"Anyway, my collar, this female, she like stuffs her crack vials down her bra, figuring boobs were off-limits in a pat-down. I toss her anyway and get the crack. And now, get this—now she says she's suing me for sexual harassment." Lyd raises her right hand. "I swear."

"You laugh," says Cicero.

"Yeah, Six," says Petey. "I'd talk to my lawyer."

"Oh, come on," Lydia says.

"Stranger things," says Cicero.

"Yeah," says Snapper. "Like the captain wants to give Wizard a medal, and the A.D.A. wants him hung out to dry."

"It's crazy," says Lydia, looking at the Wiz. "I mean, what did Drummond tell the grand jury?"

Wiz lights a cigarette. His voice is flat, like he doesn't care. It's his courtroom voice. "He told them deadly force was unnecessary."

Cops are gathered around the table, swearing at Drummond and bosses.

"So, Drummond think we're all buds again?" says Petey. "Law and order, lawyers and cops?"

"I hate lawyers," says Cicero.

Pepper asks what a thousand lawyers chained to the bottom of the sea is.

"So what'd you tell them?"

Lydia asks Wiz.

"What's to tell?" says Wiz. "I chased Whitman, he tried to kill me, I had to kill him."

Laughter and cheers.

"Yeah, but what did you say?" says Lydia.

The Wiz takes a short swallow of beer. "I told them what happened. I told them I witnessed the suspect shoot Officer Albovitz, who had a husband and twins. I told them that I pursued the suspect by car into a rural area, that a footchase en-

sued, that the fleeing suspect shot at me, that I returned fire, and that one round struck him in the left leg and that he became unable to flee. I told them that I placed the suspect under arrest and advised him of his rights and that in my attempts to secure the suspect he was able to seize control of my service revolver, whereupon I withdrew my backup weapon and discharged it in the direction of the suspect, striking him twice in the chest and abdomen area. I told them that the suspect expired before medical help arrived." He picks up his beer.

"And they said righteous shoot," says Snapper.

Wiz shrugs. "They didn't indict."

"They don't get more righteous," says Lydia, and we all *amen* that. Smitty buys the house a round in honor of Wiz, and cops around us slap Wiz's back and shake his hand and say welcome back and good shoot. The jukebox cranks up, and they drift to the bar or TV or pool tables. It's just us again.

"A good start," says Pepper, and when we look at him, he says, "A thousand lawyers at the bottom of the sea. A good start."

I shake a cigarette from Wiz's pack.

"I thought you quit," he says, lighting me up.

I say, "I thought you quit."

"So what really happened out there?" says Lydia.

Wiz's tone gets sharp. "Meaning?"

"Hey," Lydia says, palms up.

"They've had a lid on this thing," says Snapper. "All we got is rumors."

"That's all I meant," says Lydia.

Wiz eases back in his chair.

"Like, I heard you were at the grocery store or something," says Lyd. The Wiz doesn't say anything. Lyd picks up her empty shot glass, sets it down. "I mean, you can talk about it now, right?"

"Look, man," says Cicero, "you talk when you want. Don't mind us."

We all say, yeah, right, don't mind us, when you're ready.

Wiz says he's sorry. We say nothing to apologize for. He takes another sip of beer, his first beer. The rest of us are on Smitty's house round.

"Yeah," Wiz says, "just left the grocery store. Milk and eggs, you know. Ice cream. My kid's birthday, the little girl. Rocky Road ice cream."

He stops. He's staring at his drink. Then he looks around and gives a quick smile.

"Anyway," he says, "my scanner picks up a BOLO on a stolen car. A few minutes later somebody calls dispatch and

says he's stopped a possible at Southside and Queen."

"Cooper T.," says Pepper.

"One-man car," says Snapper.

We know a lot of the story already.

"Couple of minutes and I hear dispatch asking if everything's 10-4. I don't hear a response. I figure he's busy. Then I hear Cooper's voice, faint, 10-13, 10-13, officer down." Wiz picks up his beer.

"I was a couple of blocks away," says Snapper. "He crawled back to his car. He left a trail."

"No vest," says Lydia.

"You know the Coop," Snapper says. "He was out when I got there. Never regained."

We're all leaning in to hear.

"So then?" says Lydia.

"So the scanner is going nuts," says Wiz. "Voices and sirens. Everybody responding to the scene. I'm trying to get there, but it's rush hour and I'm in my own car and nobody's moving for flashers and a horn. Then I hear Albowitz say she's spotted a green possible and she's doing a turn-around. I'm at a red light. The green car goes by west on Queen and a few cars back Albowitz, no lights. I figure she's trying not to spook him. Ease up, confirm the plate, make a hot stop in a good place with back-up. Careful. Always wore the vest."

Cicero is nodding. Cicero and

Albowitz were partners. Cicero was in court that day.

"We hit repair work on the bridge, both westbound lanes closed down. Twenty or thirty cars up is a hardhat with a stop sign on a stick. I'm seven or eight cars behind Albowitz, left lane. The green car is five or six beyond. Albowitz is trying to call in her 10-20, but the air is still nuts with Cooper and dispatch doesn't acknowledge. So it's sit tight, no lights. Might be the perp, might not.

"So I'm sitting, Albowitz is calling dispatch, and I see a citizen walking down the bridge on the right sidewalk. Okay, no problem, but I find myself opening my door slowlike, opening my door and stepping out of the car, and at the same time I'm pulling my gun."

"That's why they call him the Wizard," says Pepper.

"So he cuts to Albowitz and taps on the passenger window. I'm out of the car with my weapon drawn. I hear a pop. Maybe I hear a pop."

"He just shot her," Cicero says. It's not a question.

Wiz takes a careful sip of beer. "Yeah."

"She didn't even have her weapon out. He just shot her in the face, sitting there."

"She was keying the mike. She went out in mid-sentence."

Cicero leans all the way across

the table to shake Wiz's hand. His voice is strained. "I want to thank you, man. For taking the guy out. For not letting him plead down. For justice. Thank you for justice for Donna Albowitz." He lets go of Wiz's hand and tosses a five on the table. "See y'all tomorrow."

We all say take it easy. Petey looks over her shoulder. "I better go with him." She shakes Wiz's hand. "I want to hear the rest later. Good work, Wizard."

Wiz nods. "Thanks, Petey."

We toast Cooper and Albowitz.

Snapper signals Smitty for the next round. Lyd is wiping her eyes with a knuckle. "Why don't we use their names before they're shot?" she says, sounding angry. "It's *Donna Albowitz. Donna.*"

"Cooper Thewlis," says Snapper. "Cooper T. The Coop, like Gary Cooper."

"Donna was Pinkie," says Lydia. "She broke a perp's little finger once when he tried to push her around. She had him on his knees calling her ma'am, with his little finger bent right back. Big guy, too." She looks at Pepper. "Who are you?"

Pepper looks confused.

"I mean, I only know you as Pepper."

"Oh. Frederick. Frederick McClure. Freddy."

Lydia takes his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Freddy. I'm Lydia Betina Simon." They shake hands and laugh.

"Betina?" says Snapper.

She shrugs. "You knew that. My grandmother."

"Her name is really Q.B.," I say.

"I thought they called you Six," Pepper says.

"Matt," says Lydia, her voice rising in warning.

"From the academy," I say.

"*Matt.*"

"Queen Bitch," I say, and she pops me in the chest with the back of her hand. She's laughing.

"*Tabby,*" she says.

"Tabby?" says Pepper.

"Sergeant Tabby to you," I say. Pepper isn't sure if he can laugh.

"Why Six?" Pepper asks Lydia. "Is that like Six-pack?"

I tap the side of my nose with my forefinger. "Sixth sense. Nobody better."

Lydia makes us say all our names. Snapper is Marvin L. Paglini, Wiz is Hatcher Lee Davis, and Wiz makes me admit that "Matt" is short for Marcus Aurelius Talbot.

"Who?" says Pepper.

"A Roman emperor and philosopher," I say. "My parents had high hopes."

So we introduce ourselves, shaking hands with great formality, and when Smitty brings

Snapper's round, we ask Smitty what his name is. The bushes above his eyes go up. "Smitty," he says, and we can't stop laughing.

So we sit for a while with cold beers sweating in front of us and smoke hanging in the light, and the jukebox and the TV and all the conversations buzzing. If I concentrate, I can hear the snick of pool balls from the back.

"So," I say.

"So," the Wiz says. "I hear more pops. I see Whitman running between the stopped lanes. I get behind him and sight down, but I don't have a backstop except the construction crew. I start running.

"I get to Albowitz, and there's glass everywhere. He shot through the window, then opened the door and shot her again. Then he shot the radio. I'm keying the mike, 10-13, 10-13, and I look down and he's put a hole through the two-way. I can't find her walkie, I'm looking everywhere, then I hear horns. Traffic's moving again. She's dead, and nobody around even knows anything happened.

"I remember running up the bridge, passing cars, but they're picking up speed. I'm almost to the green car, and now I don't care about backstops. I let go three or four rounds and his back window dissolves. His arm comes around and he opens up

and hits the hood of the car I'm running beside, and it slams on the brakes and almost skids into me. And then he's gone in the traffic.

"I run back down the bridge. Idiots are blowing their horns and yelling at my car like it can move itself. I flash my shield, but I have to wave my gun in somebody's face to make a hole in traffic. Let them think I'm crazy as long as they get out of my way."

"Why didn't you take the patrol?" Pepper says.

Wiz takes another little sip. "I don't know. No radio. I'd have to push Albowitz out of the way, have her bouncing around beside me. I'd be sitting in her blood. He'd spot a patrol." He opens his hands to say maybe that's it. His movements are small and contained. He's telling this slow. He's telling this whole thing slow.

"At the top of the bridge the ramp onto the interstate is backed up, but I can see straight down 29. Maybe a half mile out, a car that might be green is turning right onto Turnbull Road, and there's no sunglint on a back window. Maybe him, maybe not. I don't have a choice. I floor it and hold the grocery bag with my right hand. It seemed important not to send groceries all over.

"So I'm thinking about this

guy and I can't figure him. Stupid to shoot two cops. Stone killer to just stroll back to Albo-witz. Smart to shoot the radio and take the walkie. Doesn't add up.

"I got to assume he's monitoring the walkie, and he's got to assume I'm following and I could be any car behind him. He's turned on a secondary road to reduce the chance of being spotted and increase the chance of spotting me. But he's got to change cars soon or it's just a matter of time we'll get him. I turn right on Turnbull.

"No stretch is straight enough for me to see him. I'm afraid he'll turn off somewhere and then where am I? Three or four miles, I figure he's gone. Nothing but fence and cattle and pine. But I'm flying. I want him in my sights again.

"I almost pass it. A cloud of dust over a dirt road. I hit the brakes and maybe he can hear the skid, but too late now. I fish-tail onto the dirt and accelerate. It's just a logging road, runs between two pastures and curves into the woods. It's pretty rough, and I bottom out a couple of times, the speed I'm going. I hope it's not a farmer on a tractor.

"I swing into the woods, and he's standing in the middle of the road forty feet away. His gun is raised. A couple of star-

bursts open up on my windshield, and glass splinters go everywhere."

He touches his face. In the dark I can't see if there's any scarring.

"So then the footchase?" says Pepper.

The Wiz smiles then, at his eagerness maybe, but the smile is hard to read in the dark.

"I hit the brakes," Wiz says, "and cut the wheel and go into a slide—"

"A perfect TV slide, right?" says Snapper, teasing Wiz the hero, Wiz the TV cop.

The Wiz smiles again. "Well, I don't roll over, which is pretty much perfect as far as I'm concerned, especially since I'm ducked below the dashboard at the time. Groceries go everywhere, though."

Everybody smiles.

Wiz sips at a beer. "A couple of rounds impact the passenger door while the car is sliding. When it stops, I bail out and come up behind the engine block, but the road is empty. He's into the woods, running for deep cover. I take off.

"We're just running. He's not that far ahead but there's bushes and undergrowth and trees. I see his shirt or his gun flash in patches of sunlight. I think he snaps off a couple of shots on the run.

"Suddenly we're out of the

woods and into this field of baby pines waist high, all hard clay and dead weeds and briars and pine saplings. It's hard to run, bad footing and briars in your legs. But we're running.

"The pines go on forever. It's an endless bowl. It's hot and there's no wind except the wind of running. And I can see I'm not going to catch him. No way. We're going to run forever while the ice cream melts back in my car.

"Fifteen yards, maybe twenty. I've hit pop-up targets that range. I pull up into a decent stance and focus on the front sight. I can see sunlight in the tiny scratches in the metal. I can see the colors in the wings of a dragonfly hovering between us. I squeeze off the round. The shot echoes from the woodline. He keeps going. I resight, center of mass, I hear myself exhaling, I fire between heartbeats. He drops just like a pop-up.

"When I get to him he's on his stomach with his hands underneath him and I'm screaming, 'Show me your hands, show me your hands,' and he's screaming, 'Don't kill me, don't kill me.' We can hardly breathe. I tell him I'll kill him if he doesn't show his hands, show me your hands. He drags them out to either side and they're empty. I put my knee on his neck and my gun in his ear and tell him if he blinks

wrong I'll open his head. He keeps saying don't kill me, don't kill me.

"I pat him down. I reach under him, and there's the gun. The slide's jacked back. Empty, or he would have blown my head off."

"I would have lost it," says Pepper. "I would have done him right there."

The Wiz makes a movement like a shrug. "He thought I was going to. He was waiting for the bullet."

Wiz lights a cigarette. I wanted one, too.

"So," he says, exhaling smoke, "I'm in the middle of this field with my gun in this guy's ear, with no cuffs and no backup. It's hot, my face is burning and bleeding, my right eye is swelling closed. We're both still gasping like fish. I can't swallow my own spit. I want to throw up.

"I need help. I need the walkie-talkie. I hear it somewhere.

"Then I see a gym bag. I tell him to keep his face down and his arms spread or I'll kill him, and to shut up. He shuts up. I edge toward the bag. He says to take the money. I don't answer. He says, 'Take it all. Just don't kill me.' I tell him shut up.

"I dump the bag to find the walkie, and money falls out, packets and packets of twenties, hundreds. I look up. He's looking at me. 'Take it,' he says.

"On the walkie they find Albo-witz. I call dispatch, 10-13, 10-13. I get nothing."

The Wiz takes another deliberate sip from one of his beers. He's not pausing for effect. He's working something out.

Pepper can't wait. "So how'd he get your gun?" he asks, and maybe that's what Wiz is waiting for, questions. Maybe that question. Maybe to see what questions.

"I got stupid. I roll him over to get his belt to use for cuffs, but his leg is bleeding pretty bad."

"I would have let him bleed to death," says Pepper.

Wiz says, in his talking-to-a-rookie voice, "You weren't there."

Pepper sits in the dark, trying to keep his face steady, not knowing whether to blow it off or apologize. "I'm not second guessing," he says.

Wiz stubs out his cigarette. "Whitman sees his leg and starts screaming and twisting. It's an act, but I don't know it. I'm kneeling beside him, trying to stop the bleeding. I can hear a siren. My gun's in my belt at the small of my back. I feel it slide out. My backup piece is in the ankle holster under my hand. I hit him twice.

"Then the field is full of cops. A boss secures the scene and my weapon and sends me to my car to wait for the ambulance. I sit

in the front seat. A state trooper is joking by the open door, but I know he's assigned to watch me. The ice cream has melted all over. The car smells like hot ice cream. I puke in the road. The ambulance comes."

He shrugs. He's finished.

No applause now, no cheers. It's just us quiet at the table in the noise and the dark. I take a deep pull on my beer. Lydia reaches across and pats his hand. "You did good, Hatch. You know you did good."

Pepper seems surprised. "God, no question of that. The courts might have cut Whitman loose. We know who the bad guys are."

Silence stretches out. We sit knee to knee at our little tables, faces strangely shadowed in the dim lamp hanging above us.

"Whose round?" Pepper says finally.

"I'll buy if you'll fetch," says Lydia.

"Nothing for me," Snapper says to Pepper. "I got to go."

Nothing for Wiz, beer for me, and a fancy mixed drink for Lydia.

"Smitty'll take all night to remember how to make one of those," Snapper says.

Which is what Lydia wants. "Okay, Hatch," she says when Pepper reaches the bar. "Nothing against the rook. I'm wondering about a couple of things

is all. You stop me when I get out of line."

Snapper drains his mug and stands up. "Lyd's on the short list to make detective this year. Listen, I really got to go."

But he doesn't go. He's waiting for Lydia's question. I'm waiting. The Wiz is waiting. His eyes are eager and suspicious both. In them I see a full charge of adrenaline. A loud noise, he'll have a handful of service revolver.

"I hear," she says, "that the car wasn't stolen. I hear it was Whitman's own car."

"Yeah?" says Snapper. "So? I heard that. Cooper pulled the wrong car. Cooper's dumb luck." He looks around for agreement.

"But it all starts there, doesn't it?" says Six. "With the stolen car report. If there's no stolen car, there's no Cooper T., no Albowitz. No Wiz in the middle of a field."

Nobody says anything.

"If I'm not out of line," she says, "why don't you go back to the part where you're trying to raise dispatch."

Wiz says, "Let's wait on Pepper."

Snapper sits back down.

Pepper comes back with the round, laughing about Smitty and the fancy-schmancy drink. He puts it down in front of Lydia. She leaves it where it is. He

notices we're all quiet and shuts up.

"I couldn't raise dispatch," says Wiz, starting without filling Pepper in. His voice is low. "Two cops shot, everybody is on their radios. Whitman is yelling take the money, there's more. He says, 'I said zip, I said nothing, not word one.'"

"I don't know what he's talking about. I don't care. My right eye is completely shut, my face hurts like hell, it's hot. I keep calling 10-13, 10-13. Finally dispatch answers.

"I give our exact 20 as best I can. Dispatch says units are 10-17 and EMS is being notified, can I get out to the main road to flag them down. I say 10-4, but I don't know. I'm sitting on the ground. The light is blinding. I want to sleep.

"Whitman's arms are still spread. 'You got to help me,' he says. I start putting money back in the bag. He thinks I'm packing it for myself.

"There's more in the car,' he says. 'Just help me get there.' He tries to get up. I yell to get down or he's dead. He drops and looks at me and starts laughing and laughing. Then he just stops, like that. 'I thought you were in the loop,' he says.

"Now he changes. Now he says, 'Get Drummond, I want Drummond.' I don't know Drummond. I say shut up.

"'Look, you stupid cop,' he says. 'They're going to kill me, and then they're going to kill you.'"

"What crap," says Pepper, his voice loud.

Wiz doesn't look at him. "Can you hear me, Pepper?"

Pepper makes a what-the-hell face. "Yeah?"

"Can the three guys at the table behind me?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"Can they hear you?"

Pepper's voice is lower when he answers, and brittle. "What's the point?"

"Do you know how many are behind you, or who they are?"

Pepper clenches his jaw and his fists. He doesn't answer.

"I know the people at this table," says Wiz. "I've known Matt the longest, then Lyd, then Marv. They don't know you, but they know me and I know you." He stands up. "I think I'm ready for that beer."

He has three warming in front of him. At the bar he has Smitty pull a cold one. Then he takes Cicero's seat between Lydia and Snapper, across from his seat between Pepper and me. Pepper is insulted, but it has nothing to do with Pepper. Where Wiz is sitting now, there's nobody behind him.

He kills a third of the beer. "So Whitman says, 'They're going to kill you, too.' I think, what

crap. He keeps saying call Drummond. I finally say who the hell is Drummond. 'Jesus,' Whitman says, and he's scared, not of me, but that I don't know who Drummond is. 'The A.D.A.,' he says. 'Tell him I'll deal. Get him out here.' I know who he means now. I tell him to shut up again, but I know he won't, and now I don't want him to.

"'Listen,' he says, and it's like he's begging almost, like he means it. 'They're going to kill us both. When they get here, they'll kill me first, then they'll kill you and say I did it.' Who, I say. 'The cops,' he says."

Wiz takes in another third of his beer. "He tells me that Drummond has been trying to flip him, promising a light sentence to turn state's on what he calls a loop of wrong cops. He says the loop goes high. He's been holding out for witness relocation, but Drummond doesn't want to bring in the feds. Some of this I get then, some I piece together later. But we're talking major corruption, okay? Major."

"So I'm still thinking, what crap. Then he says somebody gave him up. He says what happened today was he got this phone call. He says it had to be a cop. The voice on the phone tells him the green light is on and the cops are on their way, so he grabs his cash and stuff and jumps in his car and takes

off. He's not even out of town when there's blue lights in his mirror. Cooper." He drains his beer and looks at Pepper. Pepper's jaw is still tight. "Get me another?" says Wiz to Pepper. It's a request, a peace offering, telling Pepper everything's okay again.

Pepper gets up slowly. "Anybody else?" he says, trying to make everything normal. Lydia wants a shot and beer. I ask for a coffee.

"I want him to hear this," Wiz says when Pepper's at the bar. "I wish Cicero and Petey were here."

When Pepper sets my cup down, his hands aren't steady, and he spills a little coffee.

Wiz puts his fresh beer between his hands but doesn't drink. "Six weeks. Not much to do but think. I ask myself, why blow away cops? A cop shot, the whole world's after your head. Whitman knows that. He's not stupid. So he must have thought he had to kill Cooper and Albowitz both. Every way I look, his story flies. Somebody calls him, says the hit is on. Then somebody calls us, calls in a stolen car, green, partial plate, just happened. Whitman's car."

"I don't like this," says Snapper.

"When he gets pulled, he thinks he's about to get whacked, so he

doesn't give Cooper a chance to drop the hammer."

"You're saying," says Snapper, "that somebody set Whitman up. Cops. You're saying cops used cops to off Whitman."

"Used Cooper," says Wiz. "Used Albowitz. Used me."

"Come on," says Pepper.

"More than used," says Lydia. "They got Cooper killed. And Albowitz. And almost you."

"Maybe one of *them* was supposed to pull him," says Snapper.

"But they had to know somebody else on patrol might make the stop," says Lydia. "They had to know what Whitman would do. Maybe they counted on it. I mean, a cop gets shot, then Whitman gets taken out by a bunch of pissed-off cops. It would look clean."

They keep glancing at me. I don't say anything.

"Or maybe," says Snapper, "Cooper got sloppy. Maybe Cooper was one of them and screwed up."

"Oh, right," says Pepper. "Or maybe Albowitz was one of them. Or maybe you or you or you. Maybe the Wiz. Jesus, this scumbag was trying to talk himself out of the collar and you believe him?"

"Drummond wants your head," Lydia says to the Wiz, "because you took Whitman out,

his big snitch. He thinks you're dirty. You're the hitter."

"Drummond didn't confide in me."

"I don't believe this," says Pepper.

Lydia leans forward. "Whitman name names?"

"No names," Wiz says, tapping his finger on the table to make the point. "I heard no names."

"I don't want to hear this," says Snapper.

"Sorry," says Wiz. "You throw me a party, and I do this."

"Do what?" says Pepper, getting angrier. "What are you talking about?"

Wiz turns to Pepper. "You now know some of what Whitman knew, and what Whitman knew got him killed. I didn't do you any favors tonight, partner."

"You did yourself one, though," I say. "Safety in numbers. The more who know, the safer you are."

It's quiet for a second. Then Wiz leans forward, angry himself now. "I don't want to find myself waiting for a slow back-up. I don't want my car called in stolen."

"So now *we* know," I say, "and now they'll think twice before going after you."

"Whoa," says Pepper, "this is crazy."

"And it's better for everybody that he's dead, isn't it?" I say. "Except Drummond."

"It was self-defense," says Pepper. "He had Wiz's gun."

Wiz laughs. It's a bark. It turns faces from the bar, from other tables. He waits until they turn away again. "My gun was empty," he says. "Four shots on the bridge, two in the field. I hadn't counted. He's on his back, screaming about his leg. I'm trying to stop the bleeding, kneeling down, using the gym bag, you know, direct pressure. I feel him pull the gun. I have my backup in my ankle holster right there under my hand."

The silence is broken by Lydia. "I wouldn't lose any sleep, Hatch."

Pepper is outraged. "Why should he lose sleep?"

"You ever shot anybody, kid?" says Snapper.

Pepper doesn't answer.

"Clean shoot," I say.

"Is that official?" snaps Wiz.

I raise two fingertips and make the sign of the cross.

"You on the job tonight?" asks Wiz.

"No," I say. "Are you?"

"You're IAD," says Pepper, pointing his finger like a pistol. I shake my head.

"You're IAD," Pepper says. "You're drawing overtime right now."

Wiz doesn't take his eyes off me. "Are you in the loop?"

"No," I say. "Are you?"

I know he's not in the loop, but.

He knows I'm not in the loop, but.

Whitman got my gun, but.

No names, but.

Righteous shoot. But.

"He's setting you up," says Pepper. "He's wearing a wire."

That pisses me off. I spread my arms. "You want to search me, rookie?"

His chair scrapes back. "I got two years on the job."

"Sit down, Pepper," says Wiz, his voice dead.

"He's—"

"Sit down or get the hell out."

Pepper lowers himself into his chair, glaring.

"And what does that mean?"

Wiz snarls at Pepper. "You think I got something to hide, something a wire might catch?"

Wiz turns to me. "Why better for me if he's dead?"

"I need to talk to the Wiz alone," I say. I'm looking at Pepper when I say it.

"No way," says Pepper.

Lydia and Snapper look at each other. Nobody moves.

The Wiz smiles. "Safety in numbers."

I spread my fingers. Okay.

"Why better for me if he's dead?" says Wiz.

I inhale, exhale. "The scene's the danger zone. If wrong cops get there first, maybe they do kill him, then they kill you be-

cause who knows what he told you. But if he's dead when they get there—well, maybe he told you nothing, or since you took him out, maybe you're in the loop, maybe you are the hitter. So they don't know how much you know, or who you really are, and so maybe they don't do you right then."

He doesn't respond.

"After that," I say, "after you get off-scene, all you have to do is say you don't know anything. Which is what you've been doing."

"Maybe that's because I don't know anything."

I shrug. Maybe it is.

We both quit talking. Snapper and Lydia and Pepper are frozen. So we sit, silent and awkward, not knowing what to say, what to ask. The silence will last forever unless I say something.

"How's Annie?"

His face changes. He waves his hand like he's brushing at flies. "She's eating trunks like candy. Like before. You remember the mountains."

I nod. "She gonna be okay?"

He looks down. "Actually, she's gone again. I don't think she's coming back."

"What about the kids?"

"I got a friend sitting them."

I take a sip of coffee. "Museum guard?"

He snorts. "I had to do something. A uniform. No gun. I

shush kids. An alarm goes off, I say, 'Please step away from the painting, sir.'

"No paperwork, though."

He smiles. "Not much." He looks down again. "You could have called."

"How could I call?"

"We were partners."

"The lid was on. I call, what does that look like to IAD?"

"For me or you?"

"Oh, come on, Hatch."

"It would have been nice," he says. "It's a long time, six weeks. You check in with the captain every few days, and you hang around a little and everybody says glad to see you, good luck, hang in, but you're tainted. They hesitate. You can hear it. You find yourself alone at the coffeepot."

"They don't mean anything by it," Pepper says. "It's just—"

Hatch waves away the flies again.

"So," I say finally, "what are you going to do?"

Pepper is surprised. He thinks the answer is obvious. He doesn't even think there's a question.

Hatch looks at me. "I love being a cop."

"You're a good cop," I say.

"I am a good cop," he says.

I say, "The best."

After a while he says, "My round."

"Nothing for me," I say. Nothing for anybody. Then I lean for-

ward. "Listen. You hear things. I hear Whitman had something. It makes sense. Who'd believe him on the stand? A good attorney would shred him. So people think he had something to substantiate his testimony."

"What people?" Wiz says, voice tight. He gestures at Pepper and Lydia and Snapper. "Not these people. Before today they didn't know anything."

"I hear Whitman's place was already tossed when the cops with the warrant showed up," I say.

"Maybe inside knew," Wiz says, "but it's news to the cops on the Street."

"Maybe wrong cops took it," I say. "Maybe bad guys took it. Maybe Whitman had it with him when he ran."

Wiz leans back, lifts empty hands. "I don't have anything."

"Maybe Whitman never had anything. It's not what he had or didn't have. It's what they think he had. It's what wrong cops and bad guys and right cops and Drummond think he had. You know?"

Wiz looks over at Pepper, then back at me. "I need to talk to Matt." He looks at Lydia and Snapper. They look at each other. They stand up. Snapper taps Pepper's shoulder with the backs of his fingers. "Let's go."

Pepper brushes him off. "No way. I'm not running out."

"Nobody's running out. Let's go, kid."

"Touch me again, I'll feed you your hand."

"Get out of here, Pepper," says Wiz.

"Don't do this, man. I'm your partner."

"Go wait at the bar. Go somewhere. Just go."

We're all motionless.

"Come on, Freddy," says Lydia, more gently.

Pepper pushes his chair back slowly, rises slowly. "This is wrong," he says, looking at me.

Nobody says anything. He goes to the far end of the bar. Snapper tries to talk to him, but he jerks away.

Wiz and I are across from each other, alone.

"I don't have anything," Wiz says.

I lean forward. "I'm not asking. You know? And it doesn't matter anyway. It's what they're afraid you have."

Hatcher stares into my eyes for a long time.

"I knew the gun was empty when he took it," he says, not moving his eyes. "Just as I got to him lying on the ground and sighted down, just then I realized I'd fired every round. One round left, I would have done him right there. A matter of twitching a finger. I saw Albowitz. You understand? I saw her. But my gun is empty, and

he's armed, and maybe he can whip around before I pull my backup. So I scream and wave the empty gun at him. But then his gun is empty and he's lying there with his arms out screaming don't kill me, and how can I pull my backup and do him then?"

He looks across the table, looks back into that blazing August field. "But then—what he said, the money, Albowitz, Cooper, all of it. I could hear a siren, and who knew, who knew who was behind the wheel?" He paused. "I don't know. If he hadn't taken the gun. Well. I don't know what he thought he could do. Get back to his car, maybe. Maybe take my car. Maybe just kill me. I bend over his leg and turn my back with the gun in my belt. It's his choice. He could have left it. He fires six times, fast." Wiz pushes a finger gun into my face. "Click-click-click-click-click-click." He lowers his hand. "Then he sees my backup piece in my hand, and he knows." Wiz looks away. "I shot him center of mass. I shot him twice."

The smoke is as thick as incense. I shake out another cigarette. "Why are you giving me this?"

"My service revolver is still in his hand when they get there. I'm bleeding. My car is shot up. Two cops are dead. Clean in

every way. All you had to do was look."

"To let me know you won't get out of line? Is this insurance if I'm dirty? I'm dirty, you're dirty, we can trust each other?"

He looks out of the field, back at me. "Because you're my partner," he says as if he shouldn't have to, as if it should be obvious.

I feel ashamed. "I'm not dirty, Hatch."

"I know you're not," he says.

But, I think. I know you're not, but.

I still haven't lit my cigarette. He tosses me his lighter.

"I didn't know I could do that," he says. "You know? Stone? I'm not sleeping great." He looks over toward Pepper, who turns his head.

"Good kid," I say. "He's pissed."

Hatch rubs his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. "He needed to hear it. I wish I'd heard it at his age. I think I do." He looks at his fingers. "Maybe I should have taken some of that money. For the kids. It was a lot of money."

I don't say anything.

He looks up at me. "You know, six weeks, thinking and all. I figure Drummond's been after this loop a year or more. I figure what he's done is pull some good cops in to like be a special squad

and he's running them deep cover to bust this thing."

I nod. "That would make sense," I say, "but Drummond doesn't confide in me." Which we both know is what I'd say whether it was true or not.

"Listen," he says finally, "I couldn't understand it when you went inside. I thought we were street cops forever, partners forever. I said some bad things to you, some bad things about you. Sorry."

I lift my fingers off the table, hey, no sweat, it's gone. "They're going to offer you a promotion," I say.

He looks surprised. "You could read that more than one way."

"You can read everything more than one way."

"Inside?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have to come inside."

"How is it inside?"

"It's all paperwork. You'd hate it inside."

"I know I would."

We smoke our cigarettes to the filters. He looks at his watch. "Well. Got to pick up the kids." He picks up his plaque and reaches across the table and shakes my hand. "Thanks for the party. Thanks for everything."

I tighten my grip on his hand. "Righteous shoot, Hatcher."

He nods. "Yeah. Well."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Back in the saddle?" He laughs.

I laugh.

We let go each other's hand.

"Well. Anyway. See you," I say, wondering when.

"Yeah," he says. "See you."

He stops at the bar and shakes Smitty's hand and says something to Pepper. I wonder what. I wonder what Pepper will think tomorrow. They leave together.

My coffee is cold. I stay and finish it anyway, every drop. I get the tab from Smitty. He's wiping the counter.

"Sorry I missed Wiz's story," he says. "I'll get it next time. How's he doing?"

I pretend I'm studying the tab. "What was he saying to Pepper?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. Didn't hear anything."

I look up from the tab. He's looking me dead in the eye, wiping the counter still. I nod.

"Might be a while before he comes back in."

"Yeah. I figured."

I fish out my wallet. "Smitty, you ever shoot anybody on the job?"

"A couple," he says.

"You feel bad after?"

The rag stops moving. He stares off beyond me for a second, off into some alley or a hallway in a derelict building. He shrugs. "They deserved it."

The tab is a few beers light. I leave a big tip.

"Good to see you, Smitty."

"Good to see you, Matt."

I'm halfway to the door when he says, "And don't make yourself a stranger, now, sarge."

When the captain called me in the next morning and pushed Wiz's gun and shield across his desk at me and asked if I knew what the hell was going on with the Wiz, I shrugged and said, in all honesty, captain, he seemed fine to me last night.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

Peril Island, off the coast of Maine, is a jagged bit of rock projecting from the depths of the stormy Atlantic Ocean. Although quite narrow and only twelve miles long, it has accounted for numerous shipwrecks through the centuries. Back in the 1890's, the Coast Guard installed lighthouses at the west and east ends of the island. Nevertheless, ship captains still sigh with relief once they have steered safely past Peril Island.

As the Coast Guard district commander, Ted C. Worthy was very concerned when three luxury-class yachts were recently wrecked there and their crews drowned. What really worried him was that each vessel had been looted of everything valuable on board.

Hence, he was glad when the keeper of the eastern lighthouse entered his office, cap in hand. "I want you to know, sir," the man said, "that I had absolutely nothin' to do with them wrecks."

"No one is blaming you," said Worthy. "They all happened during heavy fog. Maritime accidents are to be expected now and then."

"Them war no accidents, sir," said the man. "I hate admittin' it, but one of my neighbors on the island has been turnin' on a powerful searchlight at such times. He caused them wrecks, and he stripped them yachts clean as a yeoman's whistle."

This was startling news to Commander Worthy. "Who is he?"

"Wal-ll—I'd rather not say, direct that is. They's seven of us families has homes on the island. The men is named Abe, Brett, Carlo, Danny, Elmer, Fritz, and Gustav, all dif'rent ages from the youngest at forty-one to the oldest at forty-seven. The wives is named Alice, Bertha, Celia, Dotty, Elvira, Fanny, and Gilda. As you probably know, we each operates a little farm. Three of the residents raise livestock—cattle, sheep, and goats—and the other four are dirt farmers raisin' corn, oats, rye, and wheat."

"Not much to go on," said Worthy. "Tell me more."

"Wal-ll, I kin say this much . . .

(1) The homes extend a distance of twelve miles, from the light-house keeper on the west to the one on the east. They are spaced from one to four miles apart. The corn farmer is separated from each of his closest neighbors—Mr. Jenkins on the west and Brett on the east—by two miles.

(2) Celia's husband and the man whose age is forty-three live the same distance from the despicable man causing the wrecks (although other men live closer to him than they do).

(3) Of four homes, Mr. Jenkins lives the same distance from Elvira that Danny lives from the farmer raising oats.

(4) The man raising rye lives four miles west of Mr. Miller and three miles east of Gilda (who is not Mrs. Napier).

(5) Mr. Latour is one year older than Abe and one year younger than the man who raises sheep. Bertha's husband is older than any of the three.

(6) Alice's husband is one year younger than the oat farmer, who is one year younger than Fritz. Dotty (who is not Mrs. Latour) is married to a man older than Fritz.

(7) The islanders raising livestock include Gustav, Mr. Kraft, and Alice's husband.

(8) Neither Fritz, who is not the wheat farmer, nor Gustav is the husband of Gilda.

(9) Neither Mr. Latour nor Fanny's husband is the man who specializes in oats. One of the three is Carlo.

(10) Mr. Latour, the man who raises goats, and the forty-five-year-old man include Gustav, Dotty's husband, and the man who raises oats.

(11) Mr. Napier is not the youngest man on Peril Island, and Elvira's husband is not forty-two.

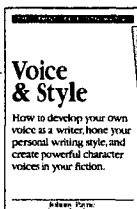
(12) Mr. Miller is one year older than the man who plants rye. Brett is one year younger than Bertha's husband. Mr. Howard is older than Mr. Inger.

"I reckon," concluded the keeper of the east Peril Island light-house, "that's all I'm gonna say. The rest is up to you."

District Commander Worthy smiled grimly. "It's quite enough. Now I know who is guilty and where to find him."

Who is the dastardly resident of Peril Island who lures vessels to their doom? Who is the informer?

See page 131 for the solution to the June puzzle.



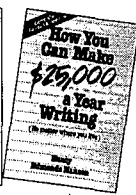
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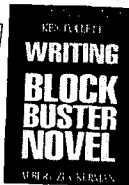
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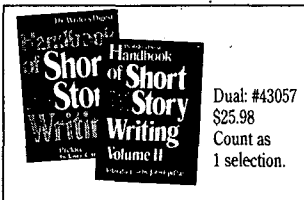
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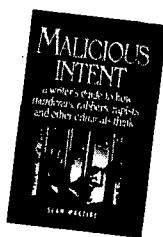
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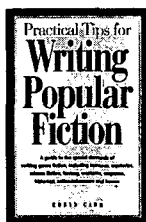
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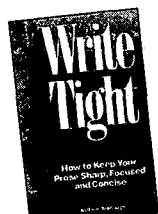
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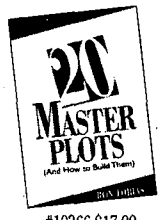
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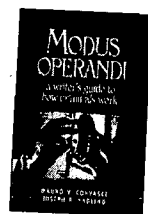
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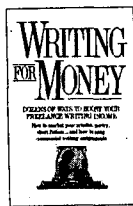
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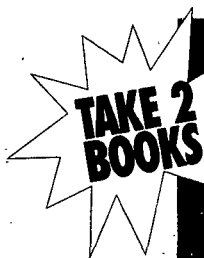
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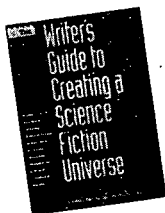
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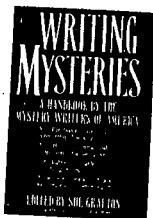
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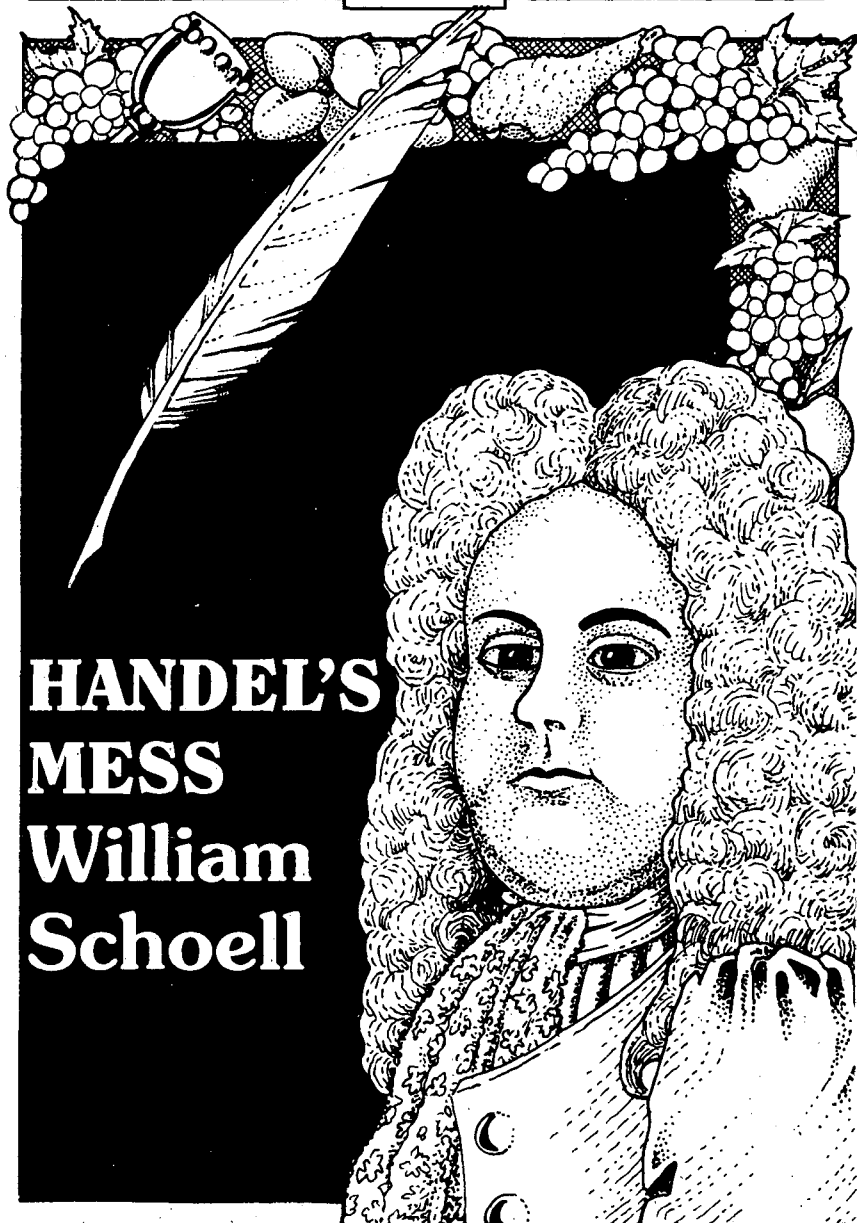
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FICTION



HANDEL'S MESS William Schoell

Illustration by Laurie Davis

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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LONDON 1727.

George Frideric* Handel sat back in his chair as his housekeeper Margaret placed a heaping plateful of chicken and biscuits on the table in front of him. He let out a satisfied sigh, smacked his lips, and picked up the first piece of poultry with almost savage anticipation.

As he tore into the chicken with undisguised gluttony, he did not see the look on Margaret's face. Margaret was always scandalized by the great musician's appetite. Hot juice dribbled out of his lips and onto his chin, and butter from one of the biscuits he'd picked up in his free hand dripped unnoticed onto his napkin and his outfit underneath.

"After that," Handel said mostly to himself, "I need a good lunch."

As usual, Margaret had no idea what he was talking about. She did not know what had transpired during his meeting with Moscone, the temperamental Italian composer she had admitted to Handel's study only a short while before. Margaret knew better than to poke her nose into her master's affairs. He was basically a sweet-natured man, really, but if he thought you'd crossed him or were spying on him, he could have the nastiest reaction.

Before she could leave the room, Handel called her back, handed her a sheaf of papers—musical compositions, even Margaret could tell that—and told her to deposit them on his desk.

"Am I constantly to be besieged by hacks and phonies who think they can compose?" he bellowed, scarcely pausing to wipe his lips.

Six years Margaret had worked for him, and she was only beginning to decipher his heavy German accent. He must have thought she'd gotten the gist of it because with a wave of his fat, hairy hand he added, "Don't worry, I was kind to him. I am always kind to them. But I cannot look at the fellow's opera on an empty stomach."

With that he took such a massive bite out of his biscuit that there was hardly anything left in his hand. "Goot, goot," he said through the wedge of mushy food in his mouth. "A very goot lunch, Margaret."

She had nearly escaped the study—he always took lunch there—when he shouted after her, "Who knows? The fellow's Italian. If I can write Italian operas, maybe Moscone can, too."

Fleeing before he could engage her in any more conversation,

* Handel spelled his name this way while in London.

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 Margaret heard the maestro mutter, "Not that they'd be as good as mine, of course."

At thirty-seven years of age, Handel was a hearty, corpulent fellow whose varied appetites were as grandiose as his reputation as the greatest composer of the eighteenth century. England had taken him to its bosom; the English people had made his Italian operas the rage; they had made him a rich, famous, and successful man. And to think, he could have stayed in Germany as a simple court musician admired by few, with little money and less opportunity to break out into the kind of achievement that had enveloped him in the great city, London. He was happy and grateful and felt it only right that he do what he could to encourage other artists.

But there had been something about Moscone that disturbed him. Something that reminded him uncomfortably of all the assorted *prima donnas* at the opera house.

He had assumed that functioning only as manager at the opera house while some other composer's opera was presented would relieve him of many of the headaches *artistes* could engender, but it was not to be. Each day they came to him with complaints.

Today it was no different.

He had just finished lunch when Margaret told him he had another visitor, a woman this time.

Handel was about to adjust his wig and attempt to pull the sides of his embroidered silk jacket across his girth when the housekeeper revealed that it was only Francesca Cuzzoni.

Francesca! He had had more battles with her than with any other soprano. What made it worse was that she was also ugly—and such a bad actress!

"Francesca," he said with a joviality he did not feel. "What can I do for you?"

The great diva was as wide as she was tall, her backside as massive as her chest. As usual, her hair was in unsightly disarray, and her shrill speaking voice was entirely grating.

"George! George! You must help me. You must help me. I tell you I cannot go on. I cannot go on like this. It is that Bordoni, that horrible Bordoni. I cannot concentrate. She does her best to upset me, to keep me—disturbed. I cannot perform under these conditions. She is out to ruin me. She is jealous, so jealous of the great Cuzzoni. She has not my talent, my experience, she is jealous, *jealous* of me, she wants to destroy . . ."

Francesca would have gone on in that vein for another hour if

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Handel hadn't shoved a leftover piece of chicken in her mouth. "Is good," she said.

"Francesca," Handel said in as patient a tone as he could muster. "If you and Faustina are having creative differences—"

"Creative? What 'creative'? She is no *artiste*, she only pretends, while her fans cheer her on—and what they cheer her for has nothing to do with singing, let me tell you. She plants spies in the audience that boo me, that make everyone boo me—just for laughs. She is a cold, spiteful—"

Handel threw up his hands and wished he were anywhere else but in this room.

It was an old, old story. Faustina Bordoni was a much younger, much thinner, and much prettier soprano than her main rival Francesca Cuzzoni—she was also a better actress—which is why Francesca had long had it in for her. Handel would have felt sorry for Francesca were it not that her jealousy had nearly ruined many a production of his operas.

Francesca had to be handled with uncompromising firmness. Once she had refused to sing an aria from *Ottone* the way he had written it. Handel had grabbed Cuzzoni in his arms, shaken her violently for half a minute, and told her that as tough as she was he was much, much tougher when it came to his music. She had respected him a little more since then, transferring her ire and contempt to the *belle* Bordoni. It had gotten to the point where Handel wondered if it were safe for the two of them to share the same stage. There was so much tension in the air when the two were together.

"Francesca," he said quietly. "If this were one of my operas, I might allow this to trouble me. But it is Signor Bononcini's *As-tianatte* you are performing in. As he is not in London at this time, I am afraid you will have to address all matters of artistic difference to your conductor, Mr. Glandelli, which, as you know, is what you should have done in the first place."

This only enraged the soprano further. "Ahh, that peon Glandelli. Always he favors Bordoni over me, always he takes her side. You have no idea what he is doing, George, you have not seen—you must come to the opera house for our rehearsal this afternoon—"

"I will see it tonight like everyone else."

Seeing that she wasn't getting anywhere with him, Francesca continued her assault on the absent conductor: "He is a little man, a fool, he has no idea what he is doing. He would not recognize talent—he thinks he is in love with Bordoni, but she is too cold to be

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loved. He favors her in everything. Do you know throughout half of the opera I am *standing behind her*, hidden away like a—like an old suit of clothing! It is unforgivable—I *could kill him*—”

Feeling a headache coming on, Handel summoned Margaret and had the indispensable housekeeper show Signora Cuzzoni to the door.

In the hours between lunch and evening, when he wasn't composing or conducting one of his own operas, George loved to peruse his art collection. His particular treasures were some Rembrandt paintings that hung in a place of honor in the library of his house.

To think that he owned these treasures, that he could sit and stare at them any time he wanted to, one extraordinary artist studying the sublime work of another! For he felt sure he was the Rembrandt of music; he knew he fully deserved his success and all that came with it.

He gave his chest a light punch. The chicken was repeating on him.

And that was when he got his third visitor of the day.

Ambitious composers. Insecure sopranos. What next? he wondered.

The man who was ushered into the library by Margaret was needle-thin and as tall as the Tower of London, if one were given to overstatement. His hair hung down below his shoulder blades and was tied with a pretty pink bow. His features were nondescript except for those prominent upper teeth that forced his lip out into a permanent half-pucker and made him seem slightly demented. He was the great castrato Farinelli—né Carlo Broschi—and he was not in a good humor.

“George, I am so glad that you're home,” he said in his unnaturally high voice that could be so beautiful when he sang an aria and so disorienting when he merely spoke.

Handel liked Farinelli, whose magnificent voice had graced many of his operas. He was basically a sweet fellow if a little egotistical. Music, singing, was his whole life, as well it should be. As well it had to be, Handel occasionally mused while eyeing the buxom charms of one of his many divas. Although it was said that Carlo's “condition” was not as romantically limiting as one might imagine.

“Carlo,” he began—he always called Farinelli by his Christian name—“what can I do for you, my friend?” Like Cuzzoni, however, Carlo had to be carefully handled.



Even before Farinelli spoke, Handel had some idea of what he would say. "It is that Glandelli. He does not appreciate me. He does not sympathize with me. He does not allow me to achieve the pinnacle of my artistry."

Which was considerable, as Farinelli had been known to hold on to a note while oboe players and other members of the orchestra—trying to outdo him—were practically passing out; then for good measure he would add a pesky cadenza. He was truly the greatest of the castrati.

"Glandelli has ideas that are foreign to me—that are *not right*. We do not work well together. I feel he does not respect me. George, if only you could talk to him, intercede on my behalf. *Astianatte* opens tonight, and I still do not feel Glandelli wants me to give the audience what they deserve, what they have come to expect. It is my reputation, no? Will you talk to him, George, for me?"

For that frightful, envious cow Cuzzoni he would never have interfered with Glandelli's particular vision for the opera (unless it was one of his own), but for Farinelli it was a different story.

He looked way up into Carlo's agitated eyes and said, "Yes, Carlo, I will go and talk to Signor Glandelli."

For the duration of the opera Glandelli and his wife Maria, whom Handel had never met, had taken quarters in a guest house near the Thames. Handel, who normally deplored exercise, enjoyed the walk to the river this afternoon. Birds were twittering overhead, singing melodies that reminded him of his own—or of others'; he mused darkly—and the colors of the trees and sky seemed so vivid they were like chiaroscuro paintings. Life is good, he thought. He banished that bad thought that had briefly plagued him and approached the house where Glandelli was presumably finishing lunch, or so Farinelli had advised him.

Handel was about to knock on the door when he heard raised voices. One he recognized as Glandelli's. The other was a woman's.

Whoever she was, she was very angry. Handel couldn't quite make out what was being said. He assumed it was an argument about the opera. Glandelli seemed to have angered everyone in the production. Handel had heard rumblings for weeks but was determined to stay out of it, limiting his participation to just running the business of the opera house for the duration of *Astianatte*.

He wondered if Signora Cuzzoni had come over to make hell for the maestro. For that matter it could be Farinelli or one of the other

castrati; their voices were certainly high enough. Most likely it was Signora Glandelli herself, and it was only a marital squabble and hence none of his concern.

Still, if there was one thing Handel enjoyed it was a good scandal, the juicier the better. He decided not to knock and let them know he was just outside the door. He might overhear things that would make him the toast of dinner parties for the next six months. And Jonathan Swift thought he had a monopoly on gossip!

Suddenly the door was swung open from within. Handel stood there in embarrassment, trying to pretend he had only just then arrived. "Oh, hello—" he said feebly.

It was Signor Glandelli. He too looked embarrassed but not for the same reason. His face was quite red, and he was sweaty. There was something rodentlike about him, furtive; even his tattered mustache, all wiry strands, resembled whiskers. He looked over his shoulder, but whoever he had been talking to was now heading rapidly toward the back door at the other end of the hall. Handel saw only a blurred figure, nothing more. It could have been a man or a woman.

Glandelli seemed relieved when the back door swung shut with a thud. "Come in," he told Handel. "Come in. I must leave for rehearsal soon, but I can certainly spare some time for *you*."

"Just a minute of your time, Signor Glandelli," Handel said, stepping across the threshold.

Handel burped—oh, that chicken!—and said what he had come to say.

While the opening night performance of *Astianatte* was not a disaster, it certainly came close.

Handel sat in his customary seat, munching on chocolates and nuts. Signor Glandelli had assured him that both Francesca and Carlo were only exhibiting opening night nerves and had no true complaints to speak of. "They will both be brilliant. Wait and see. In them I bring out the best. The *artistes*—I understand them."

The overture was nearly drowned out by the unruly mob in the opera house; a typical crowd, unfortunately. Busily they chattered to each other, passing around fruit and other food that would be thrown at whichever singers they didn't admire. They called out to their friends behind them, sewed garments, spit pits on the floor, traded gossip, hummed tunes from other operas. They would never really settle down entirely.





Things went well until Signora Cuzzoni stepped out onto the stage. Chances are it was only by sheer coincidence that the house was primarily full of her younger rival Bordoni's admirers, but Handel knew Francesca would never be convinced that it all hadn't been some plot of Faustina's. Francesca was greeted by the most venomous hissing and spitting—not to mention a fusillade of thrown pits, fruit pieces, and nuts—that she nearly backed off into the wings. Faustina, who came out next, on the other hand, was greeted with hearty, nearly hysterical cheers and applause.

This was too much for Francesca. The older woman, spitting and hissing right back at the crowd, launched herself at her rival and began pulling at her clothes and hair. Faustina, aghast at these developments, finally became just as furious and fought back tooth and nail. The audience went wild. Handel covered his eyes and groaned but ultimately found that he too could not turn away from the spectacle. The opera itself was completely forgotten as men rushed out of the wings and attempted to wrest the two women apart.

Never had Handel seen such a display on the stage of the opera house! He knew it had only been a matter of time.

When the two sopranos were finally disentangled from one another, the opera continued, but whatever mood had been established was hopelessly lost. The audience spent the remainder of *Astianatte* discussing the fight instead of listening to the music. Even Handel couldn't help but talk about it. Indeed he knew all London would be talking about nothing else for months.

Thank God he had been in the audience tonight! Thank God it hadn't been one of his own operas! As for Cuzzoni and Bordoni, they were a couple of *hussies*!

By the time the opera was almost over, all in the audience knew—unfortunately—that there would probably be no more melodrama that evening. The divas stayed in their respective corners, glaring at each other and singing, but no new fights broke out. The crowd, however, was not disappointed, for there was more to come.

Just as the orchestra played the final note of the opera, Signor Glandelli, his arms raised high in the air, let out a sickly wheeze, bent over double, and collapsed in a heap on the floor of the opera house.

"Poison," the doctor said solemnly. "If Signor Glandelli did not

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 have such a strong constitution, it would undoubtedly have killed him. As it is, he will need to stay in bed for several days."

They were in one of the dressing rooms. The doctor theorized that someone must have poisoned the maestro's lunch and that it had taken several hours to affect him. Glandelli, alternately vomiting and passing out, was too sick to be questioned.

Handel was deeply disturbed by this incident. Poison! In his lunch! For a man who loved to eat as much as Handel did, there could be no worse nightmare. Poor Glandelli. If there were a poisoner on the loose, Handel would have to stop him. Why, what would prevent this person from putting poison in one of his own meals!

As the doctor and the police inspector conferred, Handel thought back to the events of the afternoon. For instance, Francesca Cuzoni's saying that she hated Glandelli and could kill him. She thought he favored her rival Faustina, and judging from tonight's exhibition, she hated no one more than Faustina—and anyone who took her side.

Then there was Farinelli—Carlo. He too had expressed his strong feelings toward the conductor, accusing him of inhibiting the ultimate expression of his talent. Handel knew Farinelli well—a sweet, simple gelding on the outside maybe, but God help you if you dared to castrate his *art*.

There was also Signora Glandelli, whom Handel had never met. If the rumors were true—that Glandelli had taken up with a mistress, the young widow Elsie Lattimer, since arriving in London—his wife would certainly have a grudge against him. And what about the mistress? By all accounts, the tempestuous Lattimer would not take well to being dumped, if that was what had happened.

Handel recalled the feminine voice he had heard screeching outside Glandelli's door. It could have been any of them: Francesca, Farinelli, Signora Glandelli, Elsie Lattimer. . . .

This was his opera house, Handel thought. No one could get away with poisoning one of his conductors. What if they had tried it during a performance of Handel's *Ottone* or *Giulio Cesare*?

And in his food! *His food!*

While the doctor and police chief continued to confer—boors, the two of them—Handel stepped out the door and began his own investigation of this matter, this outrage . . .

. . . this mess.



*

Francesca denied having paid a call on Glandelli during lunch-time. "How could I have?" she insisted. "I was at your house, remember? I came straight back to the opera house. And that pig Glandelli, he shows up an hour late, keeping the rest of us waiting. Keeping me, the great Cuzzoni, *waiting*. The pig. I am not sorry he is sick."

Handel made discreet inquiries with the rest of the opera company. Francesca had not been gone for long. She would only have had time to visit Handel, no one else. Even Signora Bordoni, although she did not realize it, corroborated Francesca's story.

"While I'm trying to eat my lunch," Bordoni told Handel, "always that stupid cow is staring at me, staring at me, giving me the evil eye. She hates me because I'm beautiful. She attacked me tonight, did you see? Attacked me on the stage. Really, Signor Handel, is it not time to put the cow out to pasture? She would not even let me eat my lunch in peace. Finally she leaves the opera house. But—she comes back in fifteen minutes, just to make my life miserable." Bordoni slapped her forehead dramatically. "She is a monster, that one, a monster."

Handel would deal with the two ladies later. First he would pay a call on Farinelli, who had gone home immediately after the opera. He had been gone from the opera house during a much longer period of time, time enough to walk from Handel's house to Glandelli's. And he had known the maestro was eating lunch at home, probably to get away from the battling sopranos.

Farinelli denied all. "He told me he was going home for lunch, that's how I knew. I went for a walk along the river, trying to get my temper under control. George, it wasn't me. I didn't poison him. Although I might have liked to."

Handel had to admit that while he could see Carlo poisoning someone, he couldn't see him screeching. That voice of his was too pure, too sweet and angelic, to have been the one he'd heard, and he should have realized it sooner. Still, a voice raised in anger, hatred, could sound quite distorted, couldn't it?

Handel next went to Glandelli's house, where the police inspector was stepping out the door with a rather attractive lady.

"I've just told Mrs. Glandelli what happened tonight," the inspector told Handel, who introduced himself and expressed his sympathy. "She was visiting friends in the country all day. Just got home a moment ago."



"I must go to my husband," she said in heavily accented English.

"I'm sure he'll be all right, ma'am," the inspector said cheerily. "You can probably escort him home from the opera house."

Handel certainly hoped so.

As they walked away, he mused that now Signora Glandelli was out of the picture. All that left was the mistress, Elsie Lattimer, assuming the rumors were even true. He knew where the woman lived. He had met her socially several times and found her charming. This would be an awkward but certainly not unpleasant task.

Twenty minutes later he was ensconced in Elsie's parlor having tea and cakes.

"Such a surprise to see you, Mr. Handel," she said coquettishly. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" She wore a frilly pink dress that matched the striped walls of her parlor.

Handel was not one to mince words. "Signor Glandelli has been poisoned," he said bluntly, carefully watching her reaction.

"Glandelli? The conductor? Why, what a shame. Will he be all right?" Finally: "But surely you didn't come to tell me that. I've never even met the man!"

Elsie must have seen something in Handel's expression because the pretty brunette put down her teacup, leaned back on the sofa, and said, "Mr. Handel. I have been linked romantically with virtually every prominent person of masculine attributes in London, if not all of England, but I assure you that your poisoned conductor is not one of them. If you're looking for a lady friend, look elsewhere."

Handel's face colored. "My dear lady, I hope I have not offended you. It's just that I had—I had heard—well, one hears . . . I'm so sorry. I just thought that if—if you were the one—" He coughed into his hand. "You would want to know."

"It was kind of you," she said, smiling. Her pink lips were full and inviting, but Handel did not sense the invitation was for him. It was one of the few occasions he wished he did not like food quite so much.

As he walked home, kicking himself mentally, he wondered what had made him think he could do a better job of finding this poisoning rogue than the police could. The woman he had heard in Glandelli's quarters could have been anyone. Elsie Lattimer was out of the picture, but if Glandelli did have a mistress, she could be anyone. The fact that Glandelli's wife had been out of town all day was provocative but proved nothing.

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He should stick to composing music and running an opera house, he told himself.

Besides, he was *hungry*.

After a splendid late supper lovingly prepared by Margaret, Handel went into his music room, sat down at the piano, and played selections from Signor Moscone's opera. Only a few minutes later he had played enough to know that the opera was no good. Sadly, Moscone was not a composer of any great—or even limited—talent. He would have to let the man down gently. Well, he would have plenty of time to think of what to say.

It turned out that he had much less time than he'd anticipated. Half an hour later Margaret was ushering the "composer" in question into Handel's study.

"What about my opera!" he demanded. Honestly, Handel thought, these Italians! "Is it not the work of genius I have told you? Will you not see it is produced at your opera house immediately?"

Handel was about to say that he had hardly had time to study the opera as Moscone had only given it to him this morning, but something in the man's arrogant tone and ill-advisedly superior bearing brought out the worst in him.

"No, I will not!" he thundered. "This—this thing you call an opera is an *aberration*. A mockery. An utterly worthless piece of tripe that no self-respecting opera house would ever produce, and if you think I would risk my reputation to mount this wretched, badly done, execrable trifle, you, sir, are an idiot. How dare you waste my valuable time by bringing this monstrosity into my house. How dare you—"

"*Plagiarist!*" Moscone screamed. "You dare to insult me—you *plagiarist!* I have *heard* Kaiser and Graun, heard their music in *your* operas. You steal from these men and then dare to insult me, you—you—" He was nearly apoplectic.

Handel froze in his seat. The matter of his plagiarisms was a touchy one with him. Most of his brilliant music was utterly original, but sometimes—what with running the opera house, dealing with the assorted egos of his divas and castrati and musicians, what with one thing after another—he had on occasion borrowed other men's compositions, tinkered with and improved them, and passed them off as his own; or at least inserted them into his operas.

Many people knew this. No one seemed outraged by it. Perhaps they should be. They were only incidental little tunes, weren't they?

But then he was too busy with other, more serious thoughts to

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worry about his plagiarisms. He was listening to Moscone's threats and screams, preparing to hurl back every bit of abuse tenfold, when it suddenly occurred to him that he had heard that voice—raised high, so angry, high-pitched like a woman's—before.

"You! It was *you*. You were the one at Glandelli's house! And I bet you were the one who poisoned him, too! Did he also laugh at your horrible 'opera,' is that it? Come on, I can see the guilt on your face. Admit it. It was you, screeching like a banshee at Glandelli. You must have sneaked the poison into his food when his back was turned."

As he had done at Glandelli's house, Moscone turned to flee—but it was too late. The police inspector had just arrived at Handel's house, and he ran right into him. Glandelli had recovered enough to name his visitor: Moscone. The inspector had hoped Handel might have heard of him, but he had hardly expected to have him run out of the composer's study and right into his arms.

"One step ahead of me, eh, Mr. Handel?" the inspector said, grabbing hold of the would-be musician and deliberate poisoner, Moscone.

It turned out that Moscone had threatened and poisoned Glandelli not because of his opera but because Moscone had secretly fallen in love with Glandelli's wife and wanted her unsuspecting husband out of the way. She herself knew nothing of this, and Glandelli hadn't taken the "idiot" Moscone seriously. A bemused Handel pretended he had known it all along.

On the way out the door with his prisoner, the inspector turned back to Handel and said, "Glad we caught him, eh, sir? He certainly committed a terrible crime, didn't he? Why, poor Glandelli could have died!"

"A terrible crime, yes," Handel said, thinking primarily of the bedtime snack he'd soon be enjoying. He picked up the scribbled pages Moscone had given him and headed for the fireplace.

"Anyone who writes an opera *this* atrocious should be put away for life!"

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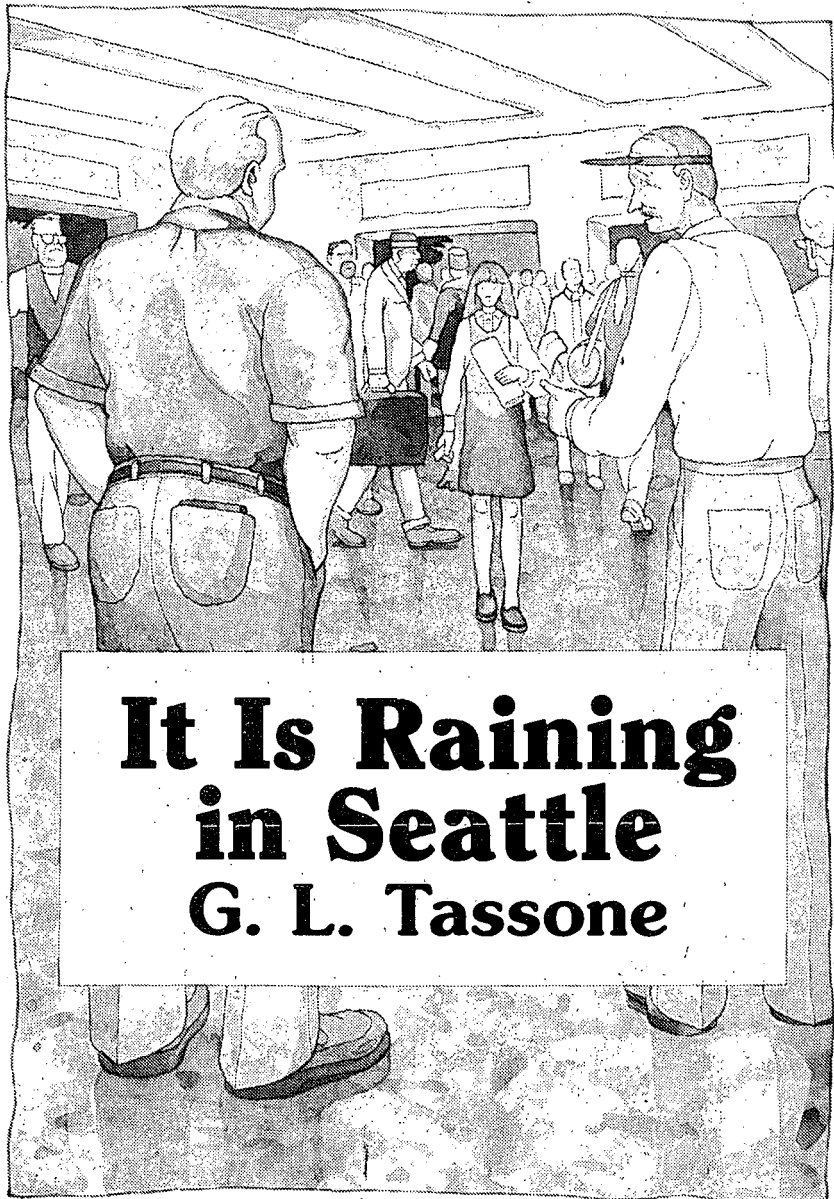
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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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Manx felt terrible. He was suffering from heartburn, the corned beef the waiter had placed in front of him tasted dry as sand, and Sky Blue had finished fifth in the seventh race at Santa Anita.

Howie, Manx's partner, wasn't eating. After he had lost a large sum of money on a wager, Howie could never eat. He drank a glass of milk to put out the fire of his ulcer.

"Manx," Howie said. "You sure the boss said to bet on Sky Blue?"

Manx's large face turned red. He could feel the sharp, burning pain beneath his heart. "Howie," he said, leaning across the table. "Am I stupid? I can't hear what Kepper said to me on the phone? He didn't say get on Sky Blue in the seventh at Santa Anita?"

"Yeah, I know, Manx," Howie said, finishing his milk. "But the damn horse didn't even finish in the money . . . and us with ten grand on his nose."

"So, you want I should call Kepper and tell him we want our money back?"

Manx turned to the waiter. "Charlie," he said, "get me some hot coffee and take this damn corned beef away before I choke on it."

Charlie hurried away. He returned with the coffee in one hand and a phone in the other.

"Long distance, Mr. Manx," he said, placing the coffee and the phone on the table.

"Long distance! Short distance! I ain't taking no phone calls. Get that phone outa here!"

"It's Mr. Kepper, from New York," Charlie explained.

Manx picked up the receiver. "Hello, boss," he shouted into the phone. "Yeah, it's me, boss. Fine . . . everything's fine. How's things in New York? It's raining there. How's the weather here? Bright and sunny, boss. No, not a cloud. Yeah, everything's just great. Oh, one thing, that horse. Yeah, Sky Blue! Ran clear outa the money. Me and Howie blew a bundle. Howie grumbled, but I told him everyone's wrong once in awhile. There ain't no guarantees. What the hell, I told Howie, this ain't the insurance business.

"What's that, boss? A girl! I got no time for girls. Your niece! She's got asthma, and she's coming in tomorrow afternoon. You want Howie and me should pick her up and take care of her until school starts. Yeah, I guess so, boss. How will we know her? How many twelve-year-olds will be traveling alone on the Transcontinental? Not too many, I guess. Yeah, Howie and me'll pick her up tomorrow afternoon. Her name's Linda. That's cute. We'll take good care of her. We'll take her to Disneyland. Sure,

boss, the kid'll have a great time."

Manx shoved his coffee away. "Charlie," he shouted. "Bring me a double shot of whisky."

"Manx," Howie said, "you know what booze does to your heartburn. What the hell was that about some kid, Linda?"

"She's Kepper's niece. She's got asthma. She's coming out here for the rest of the summer. We're going to take care of her."

"Manx, you gotta be joking! We got no time for kids!"

Manx shoved the phone toward his partner. "Here, Howie, call Kepper and tell him we don't want his niece here."

"Charlie," Howie shouted, "bring the bottle and two glasses."

"Watch your ulcer, Howie," Manx said as Charlie approached with the whisky.

The next afternoon was clear and sunny. Manx and Howie were both suffering from hangovers. On the drive to the station Manx worked a large cigar in his mouth, and Howie went on about how he couldn't stand kids.

"Manx," Howie said. "I never told you this, but I'm allergic to kids, especially girl kids. I'll head down to Palm Springs for a few days and see what's going on."

Manx didn't remove the cigar from his mouth. "Palm Springs

would be great, Howie . . . but I don't know what I'd tell Kepper. He'd be very disappointed if he knew you ducked out on his niece. Tomorrow you can take the kid to Disneyland, and then there's Marineland."

"Manx, you know I can't stand fish. I'm allergic to fish."

"Howie, unless you're allergic to living, you're going to have to get used to a lot of things for the next few months."

Manx parked the car. He left his cigar in the ashtray, and he and Howie entered the station.

Linda was small for her age. She was dressed in a dark gray jumper, a white blouse, and black patent leather shoes. She had long brown hair and large, deep brown eyes that were astonishingly serious. She was carrying the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Daily Racing Form*. She walked directly to Manx and Howie. "I'm Linda Norris," she said. "Uncle Kepper said you'd be here."

She handed her luggage ticket to Howie. "It's still raining in New York," she said. "And I don't have asthma."

Manx and Linda walked to the car. Linda got in the back seat. Manx got behind the wheel and put the cold cigar back in his mouth. "How was the trip out, kid?" he asked.

"I don't like trains," Linda said.

"Why didn't you fly? It's a nothing trip by air."

"I don't like planes more," Linda said, and opened the *Daily Racing Form*.

Howie appeared with the luggage. There were two pieces, both banker's gray.

"Too bad about Sky Blue," Linda said.

"You knew about Sky Blue?" Manx said. "It sure was. We blew a bundle."

"Uncle Kepper lost twice as much. Twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand!" Manx repeated, whistling past his cold cigar. "What made him so high on the horse?"

"Me," Linda said, without looking up from the *Racing Form*. "I guess you could say it was my fault."

"We got you a room next to our suite at the hotel," Manx said. "We thought you might like to turn in early. Tomorrow we can take a drive to Disneyland."

"Forget it," Linda said. "The Disneyland stuff is out. In the mornings I study the stock market; afternoons, I switch to the track. Marineland is nowhere. I don't like fish."

"Linda," Howie said, "you don't sound like any twelve-year-old I ever heard of."

"Well, what do you expect? I been living with Uncle Kepper

for almost a year. What else is Uncle Kepper interested in?"

"I see," Howie said. "Kepper did it. He got you interested in all this stuff."

"Well, not exactly. Let's just say, being around him I became exposed to it," Linda said, and dropped the *Racing Form*. "Mr. Manx, pull over quick!" she shouted.

Manx wheeled the black Lincoln to the curb. "What is it, kid? You scared the hell out of me. See someone you know?"

"No," Linda said. "Let's just wait here a minute and watch."

"Watch what, kid? I don't see nothing."

Ahead of them a truck came roaring through the intersection and ran into a car. The car was demolished.

"Holy Christ," Manx whispered, biting his cigar.

"Sweet Jesus! That would have been us," Howie said. "How did you know, kid? What was it? You knew it was going to happen."

Manx turned the car down a side street. "Better get out of here before we're locked in by traffic," he said.

The accident wasn't mentioned again until early that evening when they were having dinner at their hotel.

Manx sipped his wine and said, "Now, Linda, tell us how

you knew there was going to be an accident."

Linda looked up from her dinner. "Sometimes I just know certain things are going to happen. I get this feeling. That's how I told Uncle Kepper about Sky Blue."

"Yeah, well, Sky Blue was some accident," Howie said. "Ten grand worth of accident."

"You mean," Manx said, "you told Kepper Sky Blue was going to win and he bet on the horse?"

Linda was looking at the dessert menu. "Certainly. I'm not wrong very often. I had seven winners before Sky Blue." She hesitated. "I didn't have the Army/Navy game right either."

"You see other things, too?" Manx said. "Besides accidents and horseraces?"

"All sorts of things. Right now, I see the stock market very clearly. United Airlines looks good. Personally I don't care for airlines. My parents were killed in a crash. That's when I had my first feeling."

"But, Linda," Howie said, "why didn't you warn your folks?"

"Because the plane had already taken off. I saw the crash when the plane was over Georgia. That's why I won't fly. Airplanes, you're twenty thousand feet up, you see an accident . . . what can you do? You can't step off. No, thanks! No planes for

me. But if you want to buy some United Airlines, it will go up a good six points within the next week."

"Howie," Manx said, "tomorrow we bet twenty grand on United Airlines."

While eating a chocolate sundae, Linda said, "There's a fight tonight in San Francisco."

"Yeah," Manx said. "Jimmy Malone and Tiger Cody. Cody is the big favorite."

"It'll be an upset," Linda said. "I'd bet on Malone."

"Honey," Howie said, "you got to be kidding! Tiger Cody is a nine to five favorite."

"Malone will win by a knockout in the fourth round," Linda said, licking the chocolate off her spoon.

Manx asked the waiter for a phone and dialed a number. "Sammy," he said, "this is Manx. I want to bet on the fight in Frisco. Five grand on Jimmy Malone. Sammy, I know Malone is the underdog. It don't matter. Put me down for five grand."

"Manx," Howie said, "I think we blew five grand out the window."

In their suite Howie switched on the television. Manx made himself a drink, and Linda sat on the floor in front of the set.

"Well, kid," Howie said, "we're gonna see what you know about the fight racket. This Malone is

so far over the hill he's outa sight. Only the sun goes down that far."

"It's a clear, beautiful night in Frisco," Linda said. "But it's going to be a bad night for Tiger Cody."

"Kid, you kill me," Howie said. "The races, the stock market, the fights, even the weather report."

"So, it's a clear, beautiful night in Frisco," Linda repeated. "In Tucson it's raining. What do you think of that?"

"I think enough of it," Manx said, "not to bother calling Tucson."

The fight announcer came on the screen. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "it's a clear, beautiful night here in San Francisco, and this promises to be a great fight between Tiger Cody and Jimmy Malone."

The fight was over before Manx finished his second drink. It ended in the third round with Tiger Cody taking a Malone haymaker on the chin.

Howie stared at the television in disbelief. He watched the referee count ten over Tiger Cody's unconscious body. He looked at Linda. "What happened, kid? You said it was going to end in the fourth round."

Manx went to the bar and poured himself another drink. "Third round, fourth round . . .

who cares? All I know is we're nine grand richer."

"At times," Linda said to Howie, "I might be a shade off. But I knew Malone would win by a knockout. It was just a matter of minutes. . . . It's raining in Little Rock, Arkansas, and in Needles, California."

"Yeah," Manx said. "And we got most of our Sky Blue money back. I owe you for this, kid. Manx always repays a favor. How about a trip to one of the picture studios? Maybe Howie can arrange for you to meet Flipper."

"The only animals that interest me are horses," Linda said. "But there is one thing you can do for me."

"Name it, kid. Anything."

"I know in a little while you're going to send me off to bed and you and Howie are going to the Carousel Club and shoot dice in the back room."

"Kid, you're a wonder! How did you know that? We ain't missed a Friday night crap game at the Carousel Club in ten years."

"I knew, that's all. I want to go with you. I like to be where the action is. When the train passed through Vegas, I wanted to get off."

Manx shook his head. "Honey, there ain't no kids allowed in a place like the Carousel Club."

"You could get me through the

back door. No one would notice me. You said you'd do anything."

Manx puffed on his cigar. "Okay, kid, you did pick Malone. I owe you for that. But remember, you gotta play it quiet and stay away from the table."

"I won't get out of the shadows," Linda said.

"Manx," Howie said. "You can't mean it. You ain't gonna take the kid into the back room of the Carousel Club and let her watch the crap game?"

"You don't think anyone would try to stop me . . . do you?" Manx said, finishing his drink.

"Manx, she's just a kid."

"Yeah, but not like any kid I ever met. So she stands around for half an hour. We owe her a favor."

Linda went into the bathroom and began to brush her hair. She came out in a few minutes, still brushing her hair. "I'm excited," she said. "Right now I couldn't even tell you what the weather is like in Bangor, Maine."

She stopped brushing her hair and closed her eyes. "Damp and foggy," she said. "But sun in the morning."

It was after nine o'clock when they arrived at the Carousel Club. There was a ray of yellow light shining beneath the back door.

A large man with a gruff voice opened the door when Manx

rapped. "You're early tonight," he said. "But there's plenty of action."

There was a crowd of people around the dice table. The room was lit by one dim bulb over the table.

Linda remained in the shadows, leaned against the wall, and watched the gamblers. She poked Manx in the side with her elbow. "The little guy," she whispered, "with the red hair, bet on him when he gets the dice."

Manx and Howie moved to the table. They waited as the dice moved from player to player. When the man with the red hair got the dice, Manx placed two hundred dollars on the pass line. Thirty minutes later the redhead crapped out, and Manx and Howie walked away from the table with eighteen thousand dollars.

"Honey," Manx said. "I ain't never seen anything like you. We all got to get rich. Howie and me'll buy you the town. We'll buy Disneyland."

"Mr. Manx," Linda said as they got into the black Lincoln, "forget Disneyland . . . there's no action there."

Manx drove the car out of the alley. Linda was alone in the back seat. "It's a beautiful night in Detroit," she said.

"What is it then?" Howie said.

"Anything you want. Tell your Uncle Howie, I'll get it for you."

"Ready Mix in the third race at Hollywood Park," Linda said. "And General Dynamics will go up four points by Tuesday."

The following morning at breakfast Manx called Sammy the bookmaker and bet five thousand to win on Ready Mix. Howie called his broker and bought ten thousand shares of General Dynamics.

"Kid," Manx said, "I ain't never seen anything like you. Ready Mix is going off at ten to one."

Linda looked up from her French toast. "It's cold and rainy in Billings, Montana," she said. "But it's very hot in Mobile, Alabama."

Manx smeared jam on his toast. "What'll it be, kid? What would you like to do today?"

"If it's all right," Linda said, "I'd like to do some shopping. There are very nice stores on Rodeo Drive."

Before lunch Linda picked out six gray dresses in various shades and fabrics. Also, three gray jumpers, a dozen white blouses, and three pairs of black patent leather shoes. She also selected three additional pieces of luggage, all in the same banker's gray.

When they returned to the hotel, Linda said, "The race just ended. Ready Mix won by three lengths."

Manx picked up the phone and called Sammy. There was a wide grin on his face as he listened to Sammy's voice.

"Ready Mix won by three lengths," Manx said, putting the phone down.

Howie picked Linda up and kissed her on the cheek. "Kid," he said, "there ain't never been nothing like you." Then, his face turning red, he lowered her to the floor.

"It's raining in Yuma," she said. "But it's bright and sunny in Tucson."

By Tuesday General Dynamics had gone up six points, and Linda told Howie to sell. That afternoon, at lunch, she looked up from her strawberry shortcake, heavy on the whipped cream, and said, "Tomorrow General Motors is going to find a steering defect in the new Chevrolets and call them all back. The stock will go down at least eight points."

"All the new Chevrolets?" Manx asked.

"Every last one of them," Linda said. "May I have some more shortcake? It will take General Motors months to recover."

Manx picked up the phone and called his broker. "Ewald," he said. "Manx here. I want you to sell General Motors short. Yeah, General Motors! I don't care if you advise against it or not! It's gonna start to sink to-

morrow. I got fifty thousand says so!" He slammed the receiver down.

"Can you imagine," he said to Howie, "Ewald telling me that General Motors is very solid. Wait till he hears about the bum steering in the new Chevies."

When Linda had finished her dessert, she said, "Wednesday Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas will sign a three picture deal with MGM. The stock will skyrocket. Their first picture will be *Tormented Woman* and will win four Oscars."

Howie picked up the phone. "Ewald," he said, "Howie McCalister. I want to buy ten thousand shares of MGM. Yeah, I like the movie business."

The next afternoon at lunch Manx opened the newspaper. The lead article was about Ford finding a steering defect in the new Fords and calling them all back. Ford stock was dropping. General Motors had gone up two points.

"Linda, baby," Manx said, feeling heartburn in every part of his chest. "It was Fords, baby! It was Fords!"

Linda ate her orange sherbet. "I was confused on the make," she said. "I've never been good on cars. But it was the steering ... wasn't it?"

"Baby, it was the steering all right, but I'm afraid those

Chevies are steering as good as ever."

Linda finished her dessert. "Now it's bright and sunny in Yuma," she said.

The next day the papers announced that Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas had signed a three picture deal with Universal. The stock went up eight points. MGM dropped three points.

At lunch Manx's heartburn was murdering him. Howie's ulcer was burning lava in the pit of his stomach.

"Kid," Howie said, "it was Universal! MGM announced a new Flipper movie. How many Oscars will that grab?"

"*Tormented Woman* will get four Oscars," Linda said. "Sharon Stone will win Best Actress of the Year."

"Look, kid," Manx said, "no one's perfect. How about something at Santa Anita? You never miss on the horses."

"Except for Sky Blue," Howie said.

"I haven't been seeing horses," Linda said, biting into her apple cobbler. "Right now they all look like they're running on a glue track."

Friday she gave them the results of the Yankee/Red Sox baseball game and the weather report for Austin, Texas.

They watched the game on television. Linda had the score

right . . . but the teams reversed. Manx and Howie felt another twenty thousand leave their pockets.

At dinner they didn't offer Linda any dessert.

"I can't understand it," Manx said as he drank an Alka-Seltzer. "You had the score right but the teams wrong."

"No one's perfect," Linda said. "I'd like some strawberry shortcake."

Manx chewed on his cigar. Howie worried about his ulcer.

"Look," Linda said, "I'm sorry. We can take the clothes back."

"It's all right, honey, you keep the clothes," Manx said.

"It's cloudy and cool in Albany, New York," Linda said, digging into her shortcake.

Two days running, Linda picked three winners at Bay Meadows. Manx and Howie felt much better. Then they went to the ball park, and she had the score right but the teams wrong. General Foods went down four points after she insisted they buy, and at the Carousel Club on Friday night they lost thirty thousand dollars while Linda remained in the shadows and pointed at different people who shot the dice. That night after Linda was asleep Manx and Howie had a long talk.

"It's crazy," Manx said. "I feel like we got the key to Fort Knox,

only we're turning it the wrong way."

"That's what it's like," Howie said. "It's eerie. But we don't get rid of her . . . we go crazy, or broke, or maybe both."

"I been thinking," Manx said. "We got to end up broke. That's why Kepper sent her out here. She probably hurt him worse than us."

"What are we gonna do?" Howie asked.

"We can't send her back to Kepper till school starts. Remember, Kepper's the boss. I got a brother, Jasper, lives in Seattle. He's not in the rackets. He's square. He owns a shoe store. Got a wife and three kids. We'll send Linda there for the rest of the summer."

"That's good," Howie said. "Really, I hate to see the kid go. It's been exciting with her around. Remember that first night at the Carousel Club when she pointed at the redhaired guy and he shot the dice for thirty minutes?"

"Yeah," Manx said. "And I remember Chevrolet and Sharon Stone, too. No, we got to get rid of her. We was doing okay before. She gives us an edge we can't afford. You can't take a chance and not bet, and you end up a loser if you do."

Manx picked up the phone and called his brother in Seattle. "Jasper," he said, "it's me,

Manx. Yeah, I know it's late. Everything's fine. How's Martha and the kids? Great! I'm glad to hear it. How's the shoe business? Good.

"Jasper, I got a favor you should do me. There's this girl. Jasper, she's twelve years old! Kepper's niece. Her name's Linda. I want you to let her stay with you for the rest of the summer. Jasper, there's nothing wrong with her. She's a great kid. Martha'll love her. We're putting her on the train in the morning. No, she won't fly. Give my love to Martha and the kids.

"And, Jasper, I'll send a little something so you can make the shoe store bigger. That's all right, Jasper, I'm glad to do it."

Manx made himself a drink. "Well, that's that," he said.

"I guess you had to do it," Howie said. "But I'm sure gonna miss the kid."

"Yeah. Well, we better get some sleep. We'll take her to the station after breakfast."

The next morning Linda was waiting for Manx and Howie in the lobby of the hotel. She was reading the *Wall Street Journal*. She was dressed in a gray skirt, a white blouse, and a gray cashmere sweater. Her luggage was at her feet.

She looked up at Manx and Howie. "I'm not going to like

Seattle," she said. "There's no action there. I don't like shoe stores, and I can't stand to play with kids."

"I'm sorry, Linda," Manx said, "but it's only till school starts."

"Let's go," Linda said. "The train leaves in an hour."

They rode to the station in silence. Howie checked the luggage, and Manx purchased the ticket. They stood in a tight uncomfortable knot. They heard the conductor call, "All aboard!"

"Goodbye," Linda said.

"Goodbye," Manx and Howie said.

"It's raining in Seattle," Linda said as she boarded the train.

Manx could feel his heartburn. The train began to ease out of the station.

"Lowboy in the third at Delmar," Linda shouted as the train moved away.

Manx and Howie watched the train until it disappeared. They left the station and got into the black Lincoln.

"Lowboy in the third at Delmar," Manx said, chewing on his cigar.

"What say we call Sammy and bet a few grand for sentimental reasons," Howie said.

"A few grand," Manx said, wheeling the Lincoln into traffic. "We bet ten grand, at least. Lowboy sounds good to me."

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Illustration by Jeff Colson

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

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Late June. Sunlight bores through the blinds and lies in smoldering parallel bands across the carpet.

Eddie Olivera leans back, hands locked behind his head, while I examine the golf club on his desk. It looks like an ordinary #3 wood, and I say as much.

"Come on, Charles, you're supposed to be a detective. Decipher the cryptic inscription. Spin me a theory that explains the telltale marks."

"Metal shaft, metal head," I say. "Not so good for telltale marks."

"Give up, Sherlock?"

I shake my head. The third man in the room speaks up.

"Really, lieutenant, is this necessary?" He's a tall, thin number wearing a tailored three-piece suit, school tie, and a pair of shoes that cost the equivalent of a week's salary for a cop. The voice is cultured, but the face looks like it got caught in the elevator doors. Eddie ignores him.

I turn my attention to the club again. There are a couple of scuffmarks on the head, and the little plug at the top of the shaft by the grip is missing. Without really thinking about it I smell the opening. Then I give Eddie a look. He smiles. The faint odor of cordite is unmistakable.

I turn the club end for end and examine the head. Whoever

fashioned it was an accomplished machinist, and it takes me a minute to see it. Then a section of the grooved face yields under thumb pressure.

Olivera flips open a manila folder and slides two sheets across the desk. One is a photograph of the disassembled club head. The other is an exploded drawing of the mechanism with each part labeled.

"This is a sophisticated piece of work, Charles. I've never seen anything like it."

The diagram reveals that the sliding section of the face of the club is connected to a shear pin. When force is exerted against the club face, the shear pin releases a powerful spring which in turn drives a firing pin up into the shaft. The shaft itself has been machined to accept a single bullet.

In effect, the #3 wood has been transformed into a rifle.

"Guy swings the club, and if he hits the ball squarely—bang! The shaft acts as a barrel. Think about it: at the moment of impact the shaft is pointing dead-center at your chest."

"Loring," I say. "The guy at Royal Oaks."

Olivera nods and picks up the club.

"According to the manufacturer's spec sheet, these shafts are normally .335 inches in diameter, just about right for a .32

slug. This guy, however, wanted to be sure. He got rid of the plug at the top of the shaft and replaced it with a piece of leather. Then he modified the lower part of the shaft to accept a .38 jacketed hollow point. A killing round. It put a big hole in Loring's chest. He was probably dead when he hit the grass." He looks over at the clothes horse.

"This is Clive McKinnon, manager up at Royal Oaks. He'll tell you what happened last Tuesday."

McKinnon clears his throat and flicks a microscopic bit of lint off his lapel. "As I've already stated to the police umpteen times before," he said, "Mr. Loring was accustomed to getting out early once or twice a week, often right at sunrise. He liked to play nine holes before going to work."

"What did he do?"

"He owned his own law firm, along with his partner Arthur Feldman. On the day in question he went out early on the front nine."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. Really, if you insist on interrupting me, I'll never get to the end of this." He glances at his watch. "I have a rather hectic day before me."

Eddie rolls his eyes.

"Go ahead, Mr. McKinnon."

"Mr. Loring always played alone in the morning. Anyway,

about an hour later two other members found him lying on the fairway of the fourth hole. Shot. One of the men who found him is a doctor. He was able to determine immediately that Mr. Loring was beyond help."

Olivera straightens up, all business now.

"Mr. McKinnon is as interested in clearing this up as we are. He's asked about the feasibility of putting someone in the club under cover: a couple of things suggest that this could have—notice that I say *could* have—been carried out by someone connected with the club. Your name came up."

"Oh boy, I'll finally get to wear my green pants and yellow shirt."

McKinnon looks at me like something he just found on his shoe. "Well," I say, "maybe just the little beanie with the fuzzy ball on top."

"Can it," growls Olivera. "You ever played golf?"

"When I was younger."

"Carry your own bag?"

"Sure."

"Good. You'll make a terrific caddie."

Royal Oaks is an exclusive private golf course. A long walk lined with stately oaks winds past a pond and up to the verandah of the main building,

which houses the lounge, restaurant, and ballroom. Yews, rhododendrons, and a dozen flower gardens frame the building. Everything looks like it was laid out with stakes and strings.

I park near the practice green and get directions to the caddies' area. McKinnon explained that while many of the members use motorized golf carts, quite a few still prefer to walk the course. It is for them that a small corps of caddies is kept on standby.

The caddiemaster is Sean. I figure him for a guy who was a drill sergeant in the army and never got over it. He eyes me with distaste.

"McKinnon says you're our new caddie." He looks me up and down. I'm wearing sneakers, jeans, T-shirt, and fatigue jacket. "You ever caddied, Hawkins?"

"Sure."

"Where?"

"Here and there. South in the winter, back here in the warm weather. Following the geese."

"Uh-huh. So how come I never seen or heard of you before?"

I shrug. "Haven't caddied in awhile. I'm back at it because I ran onto some hard times."

"You mind I ask what kind of hard times?"

I give him a hard look. "The kind you don't like talking about."

"Okay." He moves in close,

lowers his voice. "I don't give a rat's ass as long as you do the job. McKinnon says you're hired, you're hired. I got no say in it, and I'll tell you flat out that rubs me the wrong way." He waves a hand at a group of men sitting on benches in the shade.

"You wait there for your loops just like everyone else. Shave regular, dress neat—get a decent shirt and lose that jacket—and say 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' to the members. No drinking on club property. Screw up and you're history, I don't care what McKinnon says."

He turns on his heel and heads for the clubhouse. I wander over to the benches and find a seat. I'm greeted with curious stares, then ignored.

Two hours later I'm still idle while several others have gotten assignments. Finally Sean approaches with a list.

"Luther! Lace your shoes and hitch up your drool pan. You're carryin' a double: Mr. Harrington and Mr. Douglas."

Luther struggles to his feet, a wiry old man in neatly pressed clothes. He's painfully thin, a reed buffeted by one too many winds. I try to imagine him carrying two bags over eighteen holes. Sean turns to me. "You're carryin' for Mr. Gordon. His grandfather once played golf at St. Andrew's, so he's an expert at the game." He flashes an evil

smile. "He'll tell you all about it."

I find Gordon at the first tee taking his practice swings.

"Ah, there you are. Good lad. My name is Gordon. We'll get along fine." He doesn't ask my name, just steps up to the tee and pounds the ball a straight two hundred yards down the fairway. Another thirty yards and he'd have beaned Luther, who is trundling along behind his party.

We walk down the fairway to Gordon's ball. He's in good position but has to wait while Luther's people putt out.

"I'll take the mashie, lad."

I give him a blank look.

"The mashie. The five iron."

He takes it from me and waggles it in the grass a couple of times.

"A good caddie knows the names of the clubs. It's important to know a mashie from a niblick from a midiron. You don't want to hand a man a mid-mashie when what he wants is the spade mashie niblick, now do you?"

I agree amicably, realizing at last why modern clubs bear simple one digit numbers: so that illiterates like me can keep them straight.

Gordon lofts a beautiful shot onto the apron of the green and a minute later chips the ball to

within four feet of the hole. No flies on Mr. Gordon.

I locate the putter, which, incredibly, Gordon calls a putter. It has a wooden shaft.

"Now this is a putter," he says. "It looks like what it is, a golf club, not a Martian cane or something out of a Dali painting. Just a straight functional putter." He sinks the putt for par.

The next seventeen holes are more of the same: Gordon chasing poor Luther around the course, Luther looking apprehensively over his shoulder each time Gordon hits the ball, me serving up the brassie when it's the spoon that's wanted, laddie.

Gordon heads for the clubhouse with a seventy-nine. I head for the benches thirty dollars richer.

Sean is talking with a tall, lanky man in a white shirt, black slacks, and two-toned perforated shoes with tassels. When he leaves, Sean comes over.

"So, how'd it go?"

"Okay. He had a good round, I got a good tip."

"And a good education, hey, laddie?"

"Well," I say, "I got the driver and the putter right anyway."

Sean smiles. "Aye, but what about the spoon and the cleek?"

The tall man has paused to

exchange pleasantries with Gordon. I ask Sean who he is.

"My boss. Your boss, too. That's Johnny Starr, the club pro. Mind your manners around him. He's quiet, but he's got a real hard edge. I'd rather run through Hell wearing a gasoline suit than get on the wrong side of him."

He turns his attention to two sorry looking men called Scratch and Sniff. Sure enough, Scratch appears to suffer from an infestation of fleas, and I can smell Sniff from twenty yards away: a terminal case of bromidrosis. I move upwind and sit down next to Luther, who is having a cup of water.

"How's it going, Luther?"

He nods. "Okay, but they were a little light on the tip, the bastards." He spits in the dirt, drinks some more water. Judging from the blush on his nose he'd like something a little stronger.

"Hell of a thing," I say, "about that guy Loring getting shot."

Luther summons up a considerable hawk. "One less lawyer is all."

"Who do you think did it?"

"Hell, that's easy. The Indians killed him."

I'm confused. "Which Indians?"

"Only Indians out here, of course. The Wampanoags. They say this here is sacred land or

some such thing. Fought the club from the git-go, they did. Now they're taking steps." Another hawk. "I don't give a good goddamn long as they don't take to shooting the working man."

Sean sends me to the practice area to shag balls for a while. Judging from the smiles on the bench, this is a form of punishment meted out to recalcitrants and new guys.

It's not so bad. After all, I just carried a bag for an arteriosclerotic insurance executive who thinks a #7 iron is a mashie niblick and who called me "laddie" for three hours.

Tuesday is more of the same. Apparently Sean is satisfied with my performance. Gordon, too: he requests me for an afternoon round.

Between laddie this and laddie that, and trying to remember which club is the spade mashie and which the cleek, I venture a few questions about Loring. Gordon isn't having any of it. Obviously the members do not discuss each other with the hired help.

The only thing he will say is that the killer is, in all probability, one of "those Indians."

Wednesday starts off overcast and cool. Rain is predicted for

the afternoon. There are few golfers, and they are using carts and carrying rain gear.

The caddies pass the time by telling their favorite golf hustler stories. To everyone's consternation, Sniff insists on joining us and telling *his* favorite story, which involves a hustler known as Farrell. Farrell traveled around the country challenging players to a single round of golf. The mark could carry a full bag of clubs. Farrell had to play with four clubs: a baseball bat, a hockey stick, a croquet mallet, and a pool cue. According to Sniff, Farrell always won.

We all laugh at the sheer improbability of such a thing, and Sniff is gravely offended. This makes me feel bad because if he's not the sharpest knife in the drawer he nonetheless means well. He's angry enough to walk away, however, and that's all right with everybody. I believe the best place to hide something from Sniff is under a bar of soap.

Then it starts to rain, ahead of schedule, and we all head for home.

Fair weather Thursday. I arrive at the club to find a crowd of people milling around the parking lot and an ambulance speeding off, lights and siren on. Sean is talking with the caddies. I ask what happened.

"Mr. Broomhall is what hap-

pened. He got blown up on the seventh green. Christ, what's going on here? Is this a golf course or a damned war zone?"

"How did it happen?"

"Some kind of booby trap. Blew his arm right the hell off." He runs a sunburned hand through his hair. "Joe Torrey was with him. He's going to have some bad dreams for awhile." He looks around as if suddenly coming awake.

"We're closed. The cops want to go over the whole place, and I imagine the green needs repairing." He shakes his head and trots off towards the clubhouse.

I join Luther on the benches.

"Who's Broomhall?"

"Hotshot realtor, that's all I know."

"How about Torrey?"

Luther blows his nose in a nasty looking handkerchief. "You ask a lot of questions."

"Yeah, well, what else is there to do? We're not going to work today."

He nods morosely. "Torrey, he's a builder. 'Nother millionaire. The lot of them make me puke. Play golf all day, then hit the lounge and it's martinis, red meat, and cigars after. Probably swapping wives, too, for all I know. And the cars! Godamighty, place looks like a Cadillac dealership." He unfolds his spare frame and gets up. "I'm

going down to Spanky's, get a belt. See you tomorrow."

He heads off, and I walk to my car. As much as I'd like to, I can't go out to the seventh hole and have a look. Olivera will fill me in later.

Luther's right. The parking lot is an impressive display of the automaker's craft. As usual, I check bumper stickers. There aren't many, and most of them are political endorsements.

There's one on the back of a new Olds, though, that makes my day. It says, "Know nukes."

"It was a pipe bomb in the cup. Smokeless powder for the propellant, shrapnel above."

We're back where we started—me, McKinnon, Olivera—at police headquarters.

"You'll recognize this one, Charles. Broomhall sinks his putt. The ball rolls into the cup and arms the device. When the ball is lifted, the thing goes off. The pipe, and the cup, helped focus the charge. It tore Broomhall up."

"How is he?"

"He's got x's on his eyes. Bled to death before the EMT's could get to him."

McKinnon speaks up. "Lieutenant, I demand that something be done. Our members are at risk from some madman, and

these murders are giving the club a black eye. I shudder to think what this will do to future recruitment, some lunatic planting booby traps and mines."

"The bomb squad is checking the tees, the greens, the cups, the flags, the carts, even the ball washers. They're going over all the sandtraps with metal detectors, and your water supply is being tested for foreign substances. When that's done, they'll move inside and go through the entire complex, from locker room to tap room."

McKinnon sighs, nods, checks his watch for the tenth time.

"Please keep me informed, lieutenant. And now I have the unhappy task of meeting with the board of directors."

When he's gone, Eddie and I sit looking at each other. We both saw a wide array of booby traps in Vietnam. And the results of them.

"We have a problem here, Charles."

"Question is," I say, "does this guy have a list, or are they random hits?"

"Well, look at it this way: either Torrey or Broomhall could have putted out first. The killer had no way of knowing which one."

"Which makes it random."

"Unless it didn't matter because he wants *both* of them. Remember, at least a dozen

golfers played the course ahead of them. That means that either the mine malfunctioned repeatedly until Broomhall triggered it, or that it was put in place just before they got there and just after the previous party left."

"Unless the previous party planted it."

Eddie nods. "We're talking to them now, and to a few other people who might do this kind of thing. The Cape isn't exactly crawling with anarchists."

"This type of mine is simple and, as we both know, quite reliable. I don't see it failing to work the first time."

"Right. And here's another thing: Broomhall and Torrey were delayed for awhile on the third hole. The battery of their golf cart crapped out, and they had to wait until someone brought them another one."

"Did the party behind them play through?"

"No party behind them. So we have fifteen or twenty minutes between parties—plenty of time for our boy to plant the mine with nobody around. Sort of convenient, wouldn't you say?"

"And," I add, "the seventh green is the most isolated on the course. It's shielded by trees on three sides. A couple of days ago you said this might be someone connected with the club. Why?"

"Because Loring kept his

clubs locked in his locker in the clubhouse. The clubhouse itself is locked at night. But somebody substituted the doctored #3 wood for Loring's."

"Who has a key to the clubhouse?"

"McKinnon, Starr, Sean the caddiemaster, the guy who maintains the golf carts, probably a couple of others. You hear anything helpful?"

"Not really. A couple of people tell me that the Wampanoags have a longstanding beef with the club."

"That they do. But the club's been there seven or eight years. Why start now?"

I don't have an answer for that.

James Stevens is a tribal elder of the Wampanoags: We are seated at his kitchen table having coffee. Outside, chickadees and finches take turns on feeders filled with sunflower seeds. Stevens marks his place in the book he was reading when I arrived, Josef Berger's *Cape Cod Pilot*.

"I appreciate your taking the time to see me, Mr. Stevens."

He's a slight, dark-skinned man with piercing, intelligent eyes. I estimate his age at seventy.

"Your name is Stubblefield."

I nod.

"An unusual name. What is your ancestry?"

"Scottish, mostly."

Stevens sips his coffee, and we watch as a plump gray squirrel makes his way through the trees toward the feeders.

"The Scots are an interesting people. A tribal people. What tribe were your forebears?"

"I think my mother's people were—are—MacMillans."

"Where are their lands?"

"I really don't know much about it."

Stevens raises an eyebrow.

"I never got into family history."

He nods, sips some more coffee. The squirrel is hanging upside down, copping seeds and managing to keep an eye on our window at the same time.

"Our ancestors shared a common affliction, Mr. Stubblefield. Your people and mine were both recipients of English largesse." He smiles, but it is devoid of mirth. "They weren't as successful there as they were here. The Scots managed to maintain their border and their lands." He flips open the book before him.

"Did you know there was a terrible pestilence here in 1612? White man's disease. Probably smallpox. It decimated my ancestors. Here is how one white historian described it: 'an awful and admirable dispensation by

which it pleased God to make room for his people of the English nation.'"

He closes the book gently, then leans over and taps on the window. The squirrel pauses but makes no move to abandon the feeder. A moment later he resumes feeding. The birds wait patiently in the branches for him to finish.

"He knows by now that I will not harm him, so he eats all he wants."

"About the golf course."

"Ah yes, the golf course."

"Is the land contested?"

"Royal Oaks was built on tribal land. We attempted to contest it, yes, but we were unsuccessful."

"Why?"

Stevens finishes his coffee and pushes the cup away. "Because your government denies us tribal status. And if we are not a tribe, then we cannot claim tribal lands. So we were unable to stop the construction of the golf course."

"Did any of the tribal members consider extralegal means of halting the project?"

Stevens smiles. "You mean, did any braves consider taking up guns? There may have been some talk of it, but it was never a serious option. What do you think, Mr. Stubblefield, that we are running around now shooting judges and stockbrokers off

their golf carts? No, the time for violence is long past. The time for violence was when the tribe sold this town to the English for a little clothing, a dozen hatchets, and a couple of brass kettles. They didn't understand, you see. Private ownership of land was incomprehensible to them. They were simply trying to get along with the newcomers." He shakes his head. "Your ancestors could have disabused them of *that* quaint notion, couldn't they?"

Royal Oaks will remain closed until Sunday so the cops can finish their investigation and the seventh green can be repaired.

I meet with McKinnon again. He lets drop that a membership at the club costs twenty grand per. I let that sink in for a minute. In my best year, back when I had a real job, I earned about two-thirds of that. I've never driven an Oldsmobile, either, not even a used one. On the other hand, nobody put a gun to my head and forced me to major in philosophy. Good for the soul maybe but in terms of career planning about as advisable as opening a livery or a slide rule factory.

The cops have run background checks on everyone including the caddies, and I've come up with nothing useful. So it's been decided that I'm going

to change roles. The club is throwing a big bash when they reopen tomorrow, something to get people's minds off the murders. Dinner and dancing will be the order of the day. I'll be attending as McKinnon's guest.

There's a chance that Gordon and one or two others might recognize me, but it's remote. I'll be dressed for the occasion, for one thing, and I'll avoid anyone I've carried a bag for. The long-range plan is for me to become a sort of permanent guest: meet the members, socialize, and generally scope things out.

This strikes me as being pretty sketchy, but then McKinnon gets out his checkbook and I see the wisdom of the plan at once.

"Clive, tell me about Loring, Broomhall, and Torrey."

"What do you want to know?"

"I'm not sure. I'm looking for a common thread, something that would tie them together in the killer's mind."

"Well, they're all rich, of course." He thinks for a minute. "And they were all instrumental in the development of Royal Oaks: Loring handled the legal end of it, Broomhall was the major realtor, Torrey was the chief contractor on the job. And Roger Parsons, of course."

"Who's he?"

"Roger is vice-president of Maritime Savings and Loan. They underwrote a sizable por-

tion of the loan for the construction."

"Is Parsons a member of the club?"

"Oh yes, a charter member, as are the others."

I spend the rest of the day finding out about my heritage.

The MacMillans, history informs me, were a well-established clan with their own chiefs. In the fourteenth century their home was the western Highlands. Their rights to the lands of Knapdale and Argyll were engraved on a large rock that stood on the western shore. According to the charter, Knap would be theirs for as long as the rock stood.

Unfortunately they had powerful neighbors, the Campbells. Due to shifting political allegiances the MacMillans fell into disfavor and lost their land to the larger clan. To emphasize the point, the Campbells rolled the rock bearing the charter into the sea.

That was in 1615. The MacMillans declined rapidly thereafter, persecuted and shorn of their territory.

At about the same time, James Stevens' ancestors, some twenty-five thousand strong, were fishing, farming, and governing themselves in New England, where they had resided for over ten thousand years.

In November of 1621 they provided the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony with food and friendship, thus ensuring the colonists' survival in the harsh new world. Eighty years later the Wampanoag way of life was more or less destroyed, and they suffered the oppression and deprivation that was visited on all the American tribes. Today there are only a couple of thousand Wampanoags left in New England.

No doubt they would agree with John Steinbeck: "The Indians survived our open intention of wiping them out, and since the tide turned they have weathered our good intentions toward them, which can be much more deadly."

A couple of hundred people crowd the Royal Oaks ballroom. The air is thick with cigar smoke and perfume.

I wait until dinner is over before making an appearance, and by now the party is in full swing. Six musicians in oversized white jackets are struggling to make sense of "Tiger Rag," and several couples who should know better are attempting to dance to it.

McKinnon takes me around to meet a number of people, most of whom are pretty well gassed.

"That's Joe Torrey." He points to a fireplug of a man seated at the bar next to a stunning bru-

nette in a revealing red dress. Torrey doesn't look like the kind of guy who'd be bothered by bad dreams.

Clive leaves me to my own devices. I get a Sam Adams and find a table near the door that gives me a good view of the room. The band gets on firmer ground with "Sophisticated Lady," and the dance floor is crowded.

A willowy blonde in an electric blue dress skirts the dancers and heads my way, a bit unsteady on her feet. When she notices me, she floats a wide toothy smile and totters over.

"Hi, handsome. How do you like me so far?"

"Just fine." I pull out a chair. "You'd better sit down."

"I want a drink." She waves cheerfully at a waiter.

"I'm Bernice," she says in a high singsong voice. "Who might you be?"

"Michael Enos."

"Michael. What a nice name." She sounds like she's auditioning for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. I'm wondering where to take it next when Johnny Starr materializes at our table. He glares at the girl.

"What are you doing, Bernice?"

She gives him the smile. "I'm socializing, just like you were with Janet Pollock a few minutes ago."

He grabs her by the arm and jerks her roughly to her feet.

"Ow, Johnny, you're hurting me!"

"Let her go," I say.

He turns to me slowly. "And if I don't?"

"Then I get up and make a serious change in your handicap."

He barks a laugh. "Maybe, maybe not. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Walter Hagen. Now let her go."

Bernice twists free of his grip and runs from the room. Starr puts both hands on the table and gives me his full attention.

"I recognize you. You're the new caddie."

I don't say anything.

"What do you think you're doing here?" he sneers. "Living a little above your station, aren't you?"

"Just trying to learn the social graces, like the proper way to bruise a lady's arm." The sneer evaporates and is replaced by a snarl.

"I'll say this just once, boyo: you butt out of my business."

"Better calm down, Starr. You try to twist my arm, I might not like it."

He straightens up and jabs a forefinger at me. "If I see you with Bernice again, you and I are going to dance." With that he stalks off toward the bar.

I head for the verandah, which

is occupied only by a young couple in the shadows who take no notice of me or of anything else for that matter. Crossing the lawn, I find Bernice in the parking lot, crying and attempting to get a key into the door lock of a yellow Corvette.

"Hey there, need a hand?"

She wipes her cheek and nods.

"Actually," I say, "I was thinking about finding a cup of coffee. Want to come along?"

She considers this for a minute, still crying a little, then nods again. I take the keys and open the door for her.

I've always wanted to drive a Corvette.

"Johnny changed a couple of months ago. When we first started seeing each other, it was good. I mean, he's quiet and awfully serious sometimes, but we had fun."

We're sitting in an all-night doughnut shop along with some boisterous teenage boys, a couple of cops, and a bearded man carrying on an animated conversation with himself. The smell of sugar is overpowering: my cardiovascular system has gone on red alert.

"How long have you been together?"

"It will be exactly a year on July seventh." A wry smile. "Not that he'll remember."

"How did he change?"

"He got mean. All this anger surfaced all of a sudden. I thought it was me, but it wasn't: he said as much. But when I'd ask him what was wrong, he wouldn't talk about it."

"Where's Johnny from?"

"Could I have some more coffee, please?"

I wave the counterman over for refills.

"Funny thing is, Johnny's from the Cape. Hyannis, in fact. He left when he was just a kid. Trouble of some sort with his stepfather, you know how that can be." She finds a Marlboro and gets it going.

"What happened to his real father?"

"He died when Johnny was in grade school. His mother remarried a few years later, a guy named Durning, like the actor, you know? Johnny and he didn't get along."

"You know why?"

"Well, as I say, Johnny doesn't like to discuss this stuff much, but he did say that his stepfather was against his playing golf. He said Johnny spent too much time at it, that there was no future in it, that kind of thing. Johnny had already decided to be a professional golfer, so it was pretty bad around the old dinner table every night. Johnny left home the day he graduated from high school."

"What brought him back?"

"His stepfather walked out on Johnny's mother, and then she lost her home and had to go into a senior citizens housing situation of some kind. She died of cancer a few years later. Johnny didn't find out about it until much later, and then, when he came back, he started working at Royal Oaks."

I finish my coffee and look out at the Corvette. A quick calculation: about five years' wages would put me behind the wheel. The cops are leaving, and one of them strolls over to admire the sleek yellow car. He probably can't afford it either.

Bernice stubs out her cigarette and sighs. "I think maybe a lot of it is envy. Johnny really dislikes people who have a lot of money."

"He's working in the wrong place."

"And dating the wrong girl."

"Why's that?"

"I'm the enemy, you see. My father is the president of Royal Oaks."

McKinnon is in his office the next morning studying his VDT. The screen shows an aerial view of a golf course. There's a little cartoon man holding a little cartoon golf club poised on the tee.

"How you hitting them, Clive?" He jumps.

"Stubblefield. I didn't hear you come in."

"What's that?" I ask, pointing at the computer screen. McKinnon looks embarrassed.

"Actually, that's the fifth hole at Pebble Beach. With my schedule, this is probably as close as I'll ever get to playing there." He swivels his chair to face me. "Have you come up with something?"

"Still checking. What can you tell me about Johnny Starr?"

"Starr? Surely you don't suspect Johnny."

"I don't suspect anyone. I'm just gathering information."

"I see. Well, Johnny is an excellent golfer and a competent instructor. He's well-liked by everyone, myself included."

"How long has he been with you?"

"A little over a year. He was on the tour for awhile; then he settled in Hawaii and worked there as a club pro. When he left Hawaii, he came to Cape Cod. He filed an application, and as it turned out, we had an opening a few months later and he was selected for the job."

"I had a talk with a Wampanoag elder. He claims the tribe is not involved in the murders. He also maintains that this is tribal land."

McKinnon sighs. "Yes, yes, we went through all that when the club was built. Actually, not

all the land was contested. Several acres in the northeast section were already developed, four or five houses that were over a hundred years old. There was no outcry about *that* from the tribe until plans for the course were made public."

"Who owned the houses?"

"I really don't remember. It was the usual situation: they held out for more money, one of them for over a year as I recall."

"Any hard feelings?"

"Just from one, a Mrs. Durning I believe her name was."

"Durning? Are you sure?"

"Yes. She was the last hold-out. Her grandfather had built the place, and she had some quaint idea about her 'roots.' She put up a stink, said she had been swindled out of her land. Utter nonsense, of course. Everything was aboveboard. Loring saw to that."

"Loring?"

"Certainly. Loring was her lawyer." He glances at the computer screen. The little man is waiting, impatiently it seems to me, to stroke the ball.

Roger Parsons manages to look overfed and hungry at the same time.

"Clive phoned and said that I was to assist you in any way possible. How may I do that?"

"By giving me some information."

"If I can."

"About Mrs. Durning and her house." His face remains immobile, but there's a flicker behind the eyes that I've seen before.

"Durning, Durning. The name doesn't ring a bell, I'm afraid."

I give him a long look. He returns it. A real poker player. "She owned the house where the tenth hole at Royal Oaks is now."

"Ah yes, of course. One of five houses we purchased—at well above market value, I might add—to secure sufficient land for the course."

"Roger, let's cut the crap, shall we? I spent an instructive hour at the assessor's office. What do you suppose I found out? Your bank foreclosed on Mrs. Durning's house. Funny how it never went up for auction. It got snapped up by Royal Oaks Development, Inc., almost immediately."

"There was nothing illegal about that. As for Mrs. Durning, she had ample opportunity to sell her house. She waited too long. By then she had made some bad investments, so she proceeded to borrow money, using the house as collateral, in an attempt to recover her losses. Unfortunately—"

"Let me guess. She made some more bad investments."

"As a matter of fact, yes. The

poor woman lost everything. A pity."

"Uh-huh. Let me tell you how it really happened, Parsons. Loring was her lawyer: she trusted him. He suggested that this bank handle her investments for her. You put her money on a bunch of fliers, high-risk stuff."

Parsons shrugs. "Investment is rarely risk free. We may have advised her unwisely on occasion, but there are no guarantees. You win, you lose. She lost."

"With a lot of help from you and Loring. 'Hooray for me and screw you,' isn't that the way it goes?"

He's on his feet now. "I resent your implications! We did nothing illegal. I run a bank here, not a three-card monte game."

"Tell that to the guy with the bombs."

"You and the cops get off your asses and *find* the guy with the bombs. That's what you're paid for."

As I shut the door on Roger Parsons, I recall a comment made by Tennessee Williams: "A vacuum is a hell of a lot better than some of the stuff nature replaces it with."

After lunch I call Eddie Olivera, but he's out of the office for the day. I stop by Golden Valley Estates, a senior housing com-

plex, where the administrator says he remembers Edith Durning and that she died a profoundly bitter and unhappy woman.

Next stop is my office where I get the Browning and a spare clip from the bottom drawer of the desk. Then I lock up and head for Royal Oaks.

It's one of those rare days when stormclouds have gathered in the north and east but the sky is still clear to the west. The afternoon sun causes the trees to explode in green fire against an amethyst sky in which gulls soar and wheel, heedless of the human drama below.

When I park in the lot at Royal Oaks, Bernice comes running up.

"Michael, I'm worried about Johnny."

"What's wrong?"

"I came here to talk with him. I'd decided that if he was mean to me again I was going to break it off. But he wasn't angry or anything, he just asked me where I disappeared to last night. I told him; I hope you don't mind. He asked me what we talked about and how much I told you about him. He just sat there while I told him, and then he told me to go home, that he would see me later."

"Where is he?"

"Out on the course some-

where. He got on a cart and just drove off. Is he in trouble?"

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Do what Johnny said, Bernice. Go on home."

All the golfers are in by now, and there are plenty of carts. I take one and head out onto the course, starting at the eighteenth hole and working backwards. The grounds are deserted save for the robins, searching the short grass for a last meal.

Starr is on the tenth green, standing with his hands in his pockets and looking back up the fairway. I stop about thirty feet away, and we face each other over the neatly clipped grass.

"You've got it figured out."

"I think so. They didn't know who you were because you kept the name Starr. Why did you wait so long to kill them?"

"I didn't figure it out until just recently. I knew my mother made some bad investments and lost the house. And the guy at the senior housing said she complained up to the end that she had been cheated out of everything. So when I first got back, I made a couple of inquiries. And I didn't find anything suspicious.

"Still, Mother wasn't given to paranoia: she was a very level-headed person. I figured I'd look into it some more. When I got the job at Royal Oaks, I didn't tell anyone who I was, or about

the house. Of course I became distracted by the demands of the job, getting settled in, Bernice—the house thing got put on the back burner."

He walks to his cart and sits behind the wheel.

"And then a couple of months ago I heard something. Parsons and Loring were getting hammered in the lounge one afternoon, making a lot of noise about some big deal they'd just swung and how they'd really put it over on somebody. They were joking around, and Loring said, 'Durning,' and then Parsons said, 'Churning,' and both started laughing like it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard."

He looks off at the trees for a minute. The light is fading, and I can't see his hands. I free up the Browning and lay it on my thigh with the safety off.

"Do you know what churning is, Hawkins, or Enos, or whoever the hell you are?"

"No, I don't."

"Neither did I. But I found out. I hired a private detective who called in a retired Treasury guy, and we all found out what churning is. It's when your broker, in this case the bank, moves your money around constantly from one investment to another. As a result, after a while you start losing money on all those commissions." He shakes his head.

"They really did her. They invested her money in high-risk mutual funds that weren't protected, and they screwed her on commissions. Sweet people."

Only the tops of the trees are lit now by the dying sun. A breeze has sprung up, causing the flag on the green to gently snap and furl.

"All that just so that grunting swine Torrey could land a big contract, so Broomhall could get his commission, so the bank would get to be a big player on the development loan, and so that leeching weasel Loring could collect whatever kickbacks were promised him for betraying my mother. What a four-some."

"So you decided to kill them."

"You bet I did."

"You drained the battery on Broomhall and Torrey's cart?"

"Yes. I needed a little time to rig the cup. I made sure nobody was scheduled right behind them, too."

"Did you make the club, and the mine?"

He smiles. "Hell, I'm a golfer, not a commando. I know a guy. I tell him what I need, he makes it. The booby traps served two purposes: they caused the others some mental anguish, or I hoped they did; and they created a public relations nightmare for the club."

I pick up the Browning. "Time to go, Johnny."

He shakes his head. "I don't think so."

As he says "think so," the windscreen on my cart shatters, and I see the muzzle flash of his gun. A sledgehammer smashes into my chest, and I roll out and onto the grass, the cart between us.

Starr races his cart across the green toward me, firing as he comes. I'm hurt, I'm on the edge of panic, and I've got only a few seconds before Starr is on me. I stick my hand up over the seat and empty the clip in his direction, moving the barrel a few degrees with each shot.

His cart slams into mine, and I roll away, fumbling to free the second clip from my pocket. It finally comes loose, but it seems to be taking a long time for my left hand to carry it over to where my gun hand is resting on the grass. There's a roaring in my ears like a heavy surf. Then voices.

The last thing I see is McKinnon's pinched features looming over me, his mouth open in a soundless cry of horror.

They tell me I lead a charmed life. I lost a lot of blood and I won't be hurling the discus any time soon, but I'm alive.

That's more than can be said of Johnny Starr. One of my bul-

lets severed his aorta, and like Broomhall, he bled to death, draped over the front of his golf cart.

Royal Oaks was properly grateful. They picked up all the medical bills, and McKinnon dropped a five thousand dollar bonus on top of my fee.

There's an old saying, something to the effect that he who sows thorns shouldn't walk around barefoot.

Roger Parsons teed up a new

ball on the first tee yesterday, took a few practice swings, and hit his first drive of the day. And his last ever. The ball exploded, killing Parsons and wounding his partner. He had taken the ball from the storage pouch in his golf bag. There's no way of knowing how long it had been there, waiting. Joe Torrey has expressed interest in selling his business and moving west.

I hear there are some nice golf courses in Arizona.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

George Monroe, the major acting as copilot on the *Laughing Lady*, was the traitor reported by his wife Beatrice.

HUSBAND	WIFE	HOMETOWN	POSITION	RANK
Frank Langham	Daphnia	Petersburg	navigator	lieutenant
George Monroe	Beatrice	Sandusky	copilot	major
Henry Norris	Claudine	Reading	crew chief	master sgt.
John Kaplan	Elaine	Detroit	pilot	colonel
Karl O'Toole	Angelica	Toledo	bombardier	captain

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE THREE STRANGERS

Thomas Hardy



Illustration by David Monette

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 7/96

Among the few features of agricultural England which retain an appearance but little modified by the lapse of centuries may be reckoned the high grassy and furzy downs, coombs, or ewe-leases, as they are indifferently called, that fill a large area of certain counties in the south and southwest. If any mark of human occupation is met with hereon, it usually takes the form of the solitary cottage of some shepherd.

Fifty yéars ago such a lonely cottage stood on such a down and may possibly be standing there now. In spite of its loneliness, however, the spot, by actual measurement, was not more than five miles from a county-town. Yet that affected it little. Five miles of irregular upland, during the long inimical seasons with their sleets, snows, rains, and mists, afford withdrawing space enough to isolate a Timon or a Nebuchadnezzar; much less, in fair weather, to please that less repellent tribe, the poets, philosophers, artists, and others who "conceive and meditate of pleasant things."

Some old earthen camp or barrow, some clump of trees, at least some starved fragment of ancient hedge is usually taken advantage of in the erection of these forlorn dwellings. But in the present case such a kind of shelter had been disregarded. Higher Crowstairs as the house was called stood quite detached and undefended. The only reason for its precise situation seemed to be the crossing of two footpaths at right angles hard by, which may have crossed there and thus for a good five hundred years. Hence the house was exposed to the elements on all sides. But though the wind up here blew unmistakably when it did blow, and the rain hit hard whenever it fell, the various weathers of the winter season were not quite so formidable on the coomb as they were imagined to be by dwellers on low ground. The raw rimes were not so pernicious as in the hollows, and the frosts were scarcely so severe. When the shepherd and his family who tenanted the house were pitied for their sufferings from the exposure, they said that upon the whole they were less inconvenienced by "wuzzes and flames" (hoarses and phlegms) than when they had lived by the stream of a snug neighboring valley.

The night of March 28, 182—, was precisely one of the nights that were wont to call forth these expressions of commiseration. The level rainstorm smote walls, slopes, and hedges like the clothyard shafts of Senlac and Crecy. Such sheep and outdoor animals as had no shelter stood with their buttocks to the winds, while the tails of

First published in Wessex Tales by Thomas Hardy in 1888.

little birds trying to roost on some scraggy thorn were blown inside-out like umbrellas. The gable end of the cottage was stained with wet, and the eavesdroppings flapped against the wall. Yet never was commiseration for the shepherd more misplaced. For that cheerful rustic was entertaining a large party in glorification of the christening of his second girl.

The guests had arrived before the rain began to fall, and they were all now assembled in the chief or living room of the dwelling. A glance into the apartment at eight o'clock on this eventful evening would have resulted in the opinion that it was as cosy and comfortable a nook as could be wished for in boisterous weather. The calling of its inhabitant was proclaimed by a number of highly polished sheep crooks without stems that were hung ornamentally over the fireplace, the curl of each shining crook varying from the antiquated type engraved in the patriarchal pictures of old family Bibles to the most approved fashion of the last local sheep fair. The room was lighted by half a dozen candles, having wicks only a trifle smaller than the grease which enveloped them, in candlesticks that were never used but at high days, holy days, and family feasts. The lights were scattered about the room, two of them standing on the chimneypiece. This position of candles was in itself significant. Candles on the chimneypiece always meant a party.

On the hearth, in front of a back-brand to give substance, blazed a fire of thorns that crackled "like the laughter of the fool."

Nineteen persons were gathered here. Of these, five women wearing gowns of various bright hues sat in chairs along the wall; girls shy and not shy filled the window bench; four men, including Charley Jake, the hedge carpenter; Elijah New, the parish clerk; and John Pitcher, a neighboring dairyman, the shepherd's father-in-law, lolled in the settle; a young man and maid, who were blushing over tentative *pourparlers* on a life companionship, sat beneath the corner cupboard; and an elderly engaged man of fifty or upward moved restlessly about from spots where his betrothed was not to the spot where she was. Enjoyment was pretty general, and so much the more prevailed in being unhampered by conventional restrictions. Absolute confidence in each other's good opinion begat perfect ease, while the finishing stroke of manner, amounting to a truly princely serenity, was lent to the majority by the absence of any expression or trait denoting that they wished to get on in the world, enlarge their minds, or do any eclipsing thing whatever—

which nowadays so generally nips the bloom and *bonhomie* of all except the two extremes of the social scale.

Shepherd Fennel had married well, his wife being a dairyman's daughter from a vale at a distance who brought fifty guineas in her pocket—and kept them there till they should be required for ministering to the needs of a coming family. This frugal woman had been somewhat exercised as to the character that should be given to the gathering. A sit-still party had its advantages, but an undisturbed position of ease in chairs and settles was apt to lead on the men to such an unconscionable deal of toping that they would sometimes fairly drink the house dry. A dancing party was the alternative, but this, while avoiding the foregoing objection on the score of good drink, had a counterbalancing disadvantage in the matter of good victuals, the ravenous appetites engendered by the exercise causing immense havoc in the buttery. Shepherdess Fennel fell back upon the intermediate plan of mingling short dances with short periods of talk and singing so as to hinder any ungovernable rage in either. But this scheme was entirely confined to her own gentle mind: the shepherd himself was in the mood to exhibit the most reckless phases of hospitality.

The fiddler was a boy of those parts about twelve years of age who had a wonderful dexterity in jigs and reels, though his fingers were so small and short as to necessitate a constant shifting for the high notes, from which he scrambled back to the first position with sounds not of unmixed purity of tone. At seven the shrill tweedle-dee of this youngster had begun, accompanied by a booming ground bass from Elijah New, the parish clerk, who had thoughtfully brought with him his favorite musical instrument, the serpent. Dancing was instantaneous, Mrs. Fennel privately enjoining the players on no account to let the dance exceed the length of a quarter of an hour.

But Elijah and the boy, in the excitement of their position, quite forgot the injunction. Moreover, Oliver Giles, a man of seventeen, one of the dancers, who was enamored of his partner, a fair girl of thirty-three rolling years, had recklessly handed a new crown piece to the musicians as a bribe to keep going as long as they had muscle and wind. Mrs. Fennel, seeing the steam begin to generate on the countenances of her guests, crossed over and touched the fiddler's elbow and put her hand on the serpent's mouth. But they took no notice, and fearing she might lose her character of genial hostess if she were to interfere too markedly, she retired and sat down help-

less. And so the dance whizzed on with cumulative fury, the performers moving in their planetlike courses, direct and retrograde, from apogee to perigee, till the hand of the well-kicked clock at the bottom of the room had traveled over the circumference of an hour.

While these cheerful events were in course of enactment within Fennel's pastoral dwelling, an incident having considerable bearing on the party had occurred in the gloomy night without. Mrs. Fennel's concern about the growing fierceness of the dance corresponded in point of time with the ascent of a human figure to the solitary hill of Higher Crowstairs from the direction of the distant town. This personage strode on through the rain without a pause, following the little-worn path which, farther on in its course, skirted the shepherd's cottage.

It was nearly the time of full moon, and on this account, though the sky was lined with a uniform sheet of dripping cloud, ordinary objects out of doors were readily visible. The sad, wan light revealed the lonely pedestrian to be a man of supple frame; his gait suggested that he had somewhat passed the period of perfect and instinctive agility, though not so far as to be otherwise than rapid of motion when occasion required. At a rough guess he might have been about forty years of age. He appeared tall, but a recruiting sergeant or other person accustomed to the judging of men's heights by the eye would have discerned that this was chiefly owing to his gauntness, and that he was not more than five feet eight or nine.

Notwithstanding the regularity of his tread there was caution in it, as in that of one who mentally feels his way, and despite the fact that it was not a black coat nor a dark garment of any sort that he wore, there was something about him which suggested that he naturally belonged to the black-coated tribes of men. His clothes were of fustian and his boots hobnailed, yet in his progress he showed not the mud-accustomed bearing of hobnailed and fustianed peasantry.

By the time that he had arrived abreast of the shepherd's premises the rain came down, or rather came along, with yet more determined violence. The outskirts of the little settlement partially broke the force of wind and rain, and this induced him to stand still. The most salient of the shepherd's domestic erections was an empty sty at the forward corner of his hedgeless garden, for in these latitudes the principle of masking the homelier features of your establishment by a conventional frontage was unknown. The

traveler's eye was attracted to this small building by the pallid shine of the wet slates that covered it. He turned aside and, finding it empty, stood under the pent-roof for shelter.

While he stood, the boom of the serpent within the adjacent house and the lesser strains of the fiddler reached the spot as an accompaniment to the surging hiss of the flying rain on the sod, its louder beating on the cabbage leaves of the garden, on the eight or ten beehives just discernible by the path, and its dripping from the eaves into a row of buckets and pans that had been placed under the walls of the cottage. For at Higher Crowstairs, as at all such elevated domiciles, the grand difficulty of housekeeping was an insufficiency of water, and a casual rainfall was utilized by turning out as catchers every utensil that the house contained. Some queer stories might be told of the contrivances for economy in suds and dishwaters that are absolutely necessitated in upland habitations during the droughts of summer. But at this season there were no such exigencies; a mere acceptance of what the skies bestowed was sufficient for an abundant store.

At last the notes of the serpent ceased and the house was silent. This cessation of activity aroused the solitary pedestrian from the reverie into which he had lapsed, and emerging from the shed with an apparently new intention, he walked up the path to the house door. Arrived here, his first act was to kneel down on a large stone beside the row of vessels and to drink a copious draught from one of them. Having quenched his thirst he rose and lifted his hand to knock but paused with his eye upon the panel. Since the dark surface of the wood revealed absolutely nothing, it was evident that he must be mentally looking through the door as if he wished to measure thereby all the possibilities that a house of this sort might include and how they might bear upon the question of his entry.

In his indecision he turned and surveyed the scene around. Not a soul was anywhere visible. The garden path stretched downward from his feet, gleaming like the track of a snail; the roof of the little well (mostly dry), the well cover, the top rail of the garden gate were varnished with the same dull liquid glaze, while far away in the vale a faint whiteness of more than usual extent showed that the rivers were high in the meads. Beyond all this winked a few bleared lamplights through the beating drops—lights that denoted the situation of the county-town from which he had appeared to come. The absence of all notes of life in that direction seemed to clinch his intentions, and he knocked at the door:

Within, a desultory chat had taken the place of movement and musical sound. The hedge carpenter was suggesting a song to the company which nobody just then was inclined to undertake, so that the knock afforded a not unwelcome diversion.

"Walk in!" said the shepherd promptly.

The latch clicked upward, and out of the night our pedestrian appeared upon the doormat. The shepherd arose, snuffed two of the nearest candles, and turned to look at him.

Their light disclosed that the stranger was dark in complexion and not unprepossessing as to feature. His hat, which for a moment he did not remove, hung low over his eyes, without concealing that they were large, open, and determined, moving with a flash rather than a glance round the room. He seemed pleased with his survey and, baring his shaggy head, said in a rich deep voice, "The rain is so heavy, friends, that I ask leave to come in and rest awhile."

"To be sure, stranger," said the shepherd. "And faith, you've been lucky in choosing your time, for we are having a bit of a fling for a glad cause—though, to be sure, a man could hardly wish that glad cause to happen more than once a year."

"Nor less," spoke up a woman. "For 'tis best to get your family over and done with as soon as you can, so as to be all the earlier out of the fag o't."

"And what may be this glad cause?" asked the stranger.

"A birth and christening," said the shepherd.

The stranger hoped his host might not be made unhappy either by too many or too few of such episodes, and being invited by a gesture to a pull at the mug, he readily acquiesced. His manner, which before entering had been so dubious, was now altogether that of a careless and candid man.

"Late to be traipsing athwart this coomb—hey?" said the engaged man of fifty.

"Late it is, master, as you say.—I'll take a seat in the chimney corner if you have nothing to urge against it, ma'am; for I am a little moist on the side that was next the rain."

Mrs. Shepherd Fennel assented and made room for the self-invited comer, who, having got completely inside the chimney corner, stretched out his legs and his arms with the expansiveness of a person quite at home.

"Yes, I am rather cracked in the vamp," he said freely, seeing that the eyes of the shepherd's wife fell upon his boots, "and I am not well fitted either. I have had some rough times lately and have

been forced to pick up what I can get in the way of wearing, but I must find a suit better fit for working-days when I reach home."

"One of hereabouts?" she inquired.

"Not quite that—farther up the country."

"I thought so. And so be I, and by your tongue you come from my neighborhood."

"But you would hardly have heard of me," he said quickly. "My time would be long before yours, ma'am, you see."

This testimony to the youthfulness of his hostess had the effect of stopping her cross-examination.

"There is only one thing more wanted to make me happy," continued the newcomer. "And that is a little baccy, which I am sorry to say I am out of."

"I'll fill your pipe," said the shepherd.

"I must ask you to lend me a pipe likewise."

"A smoker and no pipe about 'ee?"

"I have dropped it somewhere on the road."

The shepherd filled and handed him a new clay pipe, saying as he did so, "Hand me your baccy box—I'll fill that, too, now I am about it."

The man went through the movement of searching his pockets.

"Lost that, too?" said his entertainer with some surprise.

"I am afraid so," said the man with some confusion. "Give it to me in a screw of paper." Lighting his pipe at the candle with a suction that drew the whole flame into the bowl, he resettled himself in the corner and bent his looks upon the faint steam from his damp legs as if he wished to say no more.

Meanwhile the general body of guests had been taking little notice of this visitor by reason of an absorbing discussion in which they were engaged with the band about a tune for the next dance. The matter being settled, they were about to stand up when an interruption came in the shape of another knock at the door.

At sound of the same, the man in the chimney corner took up the poker and began stirring the brands as if doing it thoroughly were the one aim of his existence, and a second time the shepherd said, "Walk in!" In a moment another man stood upon the straw-woven doormat. He too was a stranger.

This individual was one of a type radically different from the first. There was more of the commonplace in his manner, and a certain jovial cosmopolitanism sat upon his features. He was several years older than the first arrival, his hair being slightly frosted, his

eyebrows bristly, and his whiskers cut back from his cheeks. His face was rather full and flabby, and yet it was not altogether a face without power. A few grog blossoms marked the neighborhood of his nose. He flung back his long drab greatcoat, revealing that beneath it he wore a suit of cinder-gray shade throughout, large heavy seals of some metal or other that would take a polish dangling from his fob as his only personal ornament. Shaking the water drops from his low-crowned glazed hat, he said, "I must ask for a few minutes' shelter, comrades, or I shall be wetted to my skin before I get to Casterbridge."

"Make yourself at home, master," said the shepherd, perhaps a trifle less heartily than on the first occasion. Not that Fennel had the least tinge of niggardliness in his composition, but the room was far from large, spare chairs were not numerous, and damp companions were not altogether desirable at close quarters for the women and girls in their bright-colored gowns.

However, the second comer, after taking off his greatcoat and hanging his hat on a nail in one of the ceiling beams as if he had been specially invited to put it there, advanced and sat down at the table. This had been pushed so closely into the chimney corner to give all available room to the dancers that its inner edge grazed the elbow of the man who had ensconced himself by the fire, and thus the two strangers were brought into close companionship. They nodded to each other by way of breaking the ice of unacquaintance, and the first stranger handed his neighbor the family mug—a huge vessel of brown ware having its upper edge worn away like a threshold by the rub of whole generations of thirsty lips that had gone the way of all flesh and bearing the following inscription burnt upon its rotund side in yellow letters:

THERE IS NO FUN
UNTILL i CUM.

The other man, nothing loath, raised the mug to his lips and drank on, and on, and on—till a curious blueness overspread the countenance of the shepherd's wife, who had regarded with no little surprise the first stranger's free offer to the second of what did not belong to him to dispense.

"I knew it!" said the toper to the shepherd with much satisfaction. "When I walked up your garden before coming in and saw the hives all of a row, I said to myself, 'Where there's bees there's honey, and

where there's honey there's mead.' But mead of such a truly comfortable sort as this I really didn't expect to meet in my older days." He took yet another pull at the mug till it assumed an ominous elevation.

"Glad you enjoy it!" said the shepherd warmly.

"It is goodish mead," assented Mrs. Fennel with an absence of enthusiasm which seemed to say that it was possible to buy praise for one's cellar at too heavy a price. "It is trouble enough to make—and really I hardly think we shall make any more. For honey sells well, and we ourselves can make shift with a drop o' small mead and metheglin for common use from the comb washings."

"Oh, but you'll never have the heart!" reproachfully cried the stranger in cinder-gray after taking up the mug a third time and setting it down empty. "I love mead, when 'tis old like this, as I love to go to church o' Sundays, or to relieve the needy any day of the week."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said the man in the chimney corner, who in spite of the taciturnity induced by the pipe of tobacco could not or would not refrain from this slight testimony to his comrade's humor.

Now the old mead of those days, brewed of the purest first-year or maiden honey, four pounds to the gallon—with its due complement of white of eggs, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, mace, rosemary, yeast, and processes of working, bottling, and cellaring—tasted remarkably strong, but it did not taste so strong as it actually was. Hence, presently the stranger in cinder-gray at the table, moved by its creeping influence, unbuttoned his waistcoat, threw himself back in his chair, spread his legs, and made his presence felt in various ways.

"Well, well, as I say," he resumed, "I am going to Casterbridge, and to Casterbridge I must go. I should have been almost there by this time; but the rain drove me into your dwelling, and I'm not sorry for it."

"You don't live in Casterbridge?" said the shepherd.

"Not as yet, though I shortly mean to move there."

"Going to set up in trade, perhaps?"

"No, no," said the shepherd's wife. "It is easy to see that the gentleman is rich and don't want to work at anything."

The cinder-gray stranger paused as if to consider whether he would accept that definition of himself. He presently rejected it by answering, "Rich is not quite the word for me, dame. I do work, and I must work. And even if I only get to Casterbridge by midnight I

must begin work there at eight tomorrow morning. Yes, het or wet, blow or snow, famine or sword, my day's work tomorrow must be done."

"Poor man! Then, in spite o' seeming, you be worse off than we?" replied the shepherd's wife.

"'Tis the nature of my trade, men and maidens. 'Tis the nature of my trade more than my poverty. . . . But really and truly I must up and off, or I shan't get a lodging in the town." However, the speaker did not move and directly added, "There's time for one more draught of friendship before I go, and I'd perform it at once if the mug were not dry."

"Here's a mug o' small," said Mrs. Fennel. "Small, we call it, though to be sure 'tis only the first wash o' the combs."

"No," said the stranger disdainfully. "I won't spoil your first kindness by partaking o' your second."

"Certainly not," broke in Fennel. "We don't increase and multiply every day, and I'll fill the mug again." He went away to the dark place under the stairs where the barrel stood. The shepherdess followed him.

"Why should you do this?" she said reproachfully as soon as they were alone. "He's emptied it once, though it held enough for ten people, and now he's not contented wi' the small but must needs call for more o' the strong! And a stranger unbeknown to any of us. For my part, I don't like the look o' the man at all."

"But he's in the house, my honey, and 'tis a wet night and a chris-tening. Daze it, what's a cup of mead more or less? There'll be plenty more next bee-burning."

"Very well—this time, then," she answered, looking wistfully at the barrel. "But what is the man's calling, and where is he one of, that he should come in and join us like this?"

"I don't know. I'll ask him again."

The catastrophe of having the mug drained dry at one pull by the stranger in cinder-gray was effectually guarded against this time by Mrs. Fennel. She poured out his allowance in a small cup, keeping the large one at a discreet distance from him. When he had tossed off his portion, the shepherd renewed his inquiry about the stranger's occupation.

The latter did not immediately reply, and the man in the chimney corner, with sudden demonstrativeness, said, "Anybody may know my trade—I'm a wheelwright."

"A very good trade for these parts," said the shepherd.

"And anybody may know mine—if they've the sense to find it out," said the stranger in cinder-gray.

"You may generally tell what a man is by his claws," observed the hedge carpenter, looking at his own hands. "My fingers be as full of thorns as an old pincushion is of pins."

The hands of the man in the chimney corner instinctively sought the shade, and he gazed into the fire as he resumed his pipe. The man at the table took up the hedge carpenter's remark and added smartly, "True, but the oddity of my trade is that instead of setting a mark upon me it sets a mark upon my customers."

No observation being offered by anybody in elucidation of this enigma, the shepherd's wife once more called for a song. The same obstacles presented themselves as at the former time—one had no voice, another had forgotten the first verse. The stranger at the table, whose soul had now risen to a good working temperature, relieved the difficulty by exclaiming that, to start the company, he would sing himself. Thrusting one thumb into the armhole of his waistcoat, he waved the other hand in the air and, with an extemporizing gaze at the shining sheep crooks above the mantelpiece, began:

"O my trade it is the rarest one,
Simple shepherds all—
My trade is a sight to see;
For my customers I tie, and take them up en high,
And waft 'em to a far countree!"

The room was silent when he had finished the verse—with one exception, that of the man in the chimney corner, who, at the singer's word, "Chorus!," joined him in a deep bass voice of musical relish—

"And waft 'em to a far countree!"

Oliver Giles, John Pitcher the dairyman, the parish clerk, the engaged man of fifty, the row of young women against the wall seemed lost in thought not of the gayest kind. The shepherd looked meditatively on the ground, the shepherdess gazed keenly at the singer, and with some suspicion; she was doubting whether this stranger were merely singing an old song from recollection or was composing one there and then for the occasion. All were as per-

plexed at the obscure revelation as the guests at Belshazzar's Feast, except the man in the chimney corner, who quietly said, "Second verse, stranger," and smoked on.

The singer thoroughly moistened himself from his lips inwards and went on with the next stanza as requested:

"My tools are but common ones,

Simple shepherds all—

My tools are no sight to see:

A little hempen string, and a post whereon to swing,

Are implements enough for me!"

Shepherd Fennel glanced round. There was no longer any doubt that the stranger was answering his question rhythmically. The guests one and all started back with suppressed exclamations. The young woman engaged to the man of fifty fainted halfway and would have proceeded, but finding him wanting in alacrity for catching her she sat down trembling.

"Oh, he's the—!" whispered the people in the background, mentioning the name of an ominous public officer. "He's come to do it! 'Tis to be at Casterbridge jail tomorrow—the man for sheep-stealing—the poor clockmaker we heard of who used to live away at Shottsford and had no work to do—Timothy Summers, whose family were astarving, and so he went out of Shottsford by the high road and took a sheep in open daylight, defying the farmer and the farmer's wife and the farmer's lad, and every man jack among 'em. He" (and they nodded towards the stranger of the deadly trade) "is come from up the country to do it because there's not enough to do in his own county-town, and he's got the place here now our own county man's dead; he's going to live in the same cottage under the prison wall."

The stranger in cinder-gray took no notice of this whispered string of observations but again wetted his lips. Seeing that his friend in the chimney corner was the only one who reciprocated his joviality in any way, he held out his cup towards that appreciative comrade, who also held out his own. They clinked together, the eyes of the rest of the room hanging upon the singer's actions. He parted his lips for the third verse, but at that moment another knock was audible upon the door. This time the knock was faint and hesitating.

The company seemed scared; the shepherd looked with consternation towards the entrance, and it was with some effort that he re-

sisted his alarmed wife's deprecatory glance and uttered for the third time the welcoming words, "Walk in!"

The door was gently opened, and another man stood upon the mat. He, like those who had preceded him, was a stranger. This time it was a short, small personage of fair complexion and dressed in a decent suit of dark clothes.

"Can you tell me the way to—" he began, when, gazing round the room to observe the nature of the company amongst whom he had fallen, his eyes lighted on the stranger in cinder-gray. It was just at the instant when the latter, who had thrown his mind into his song with such a will that he scarcely heeded the interruption, silenced all whispers and inquiries by bursting into his third verse:

"Tomorrow is my working day,
Simple shepherds all—

Tomorrow is a working day for me:

For the farmer's sheep is slain, and the lad who did it ta'en,
And on his soul may God ha' merc-y!"

The stranger in the chimney corner, waving cups with the singer so heartily that his mead splashed over on the hearth, repeated in his bass voice as before:

"And on his soul may God ha' merc-y!"

All this time the third stranger had been standing in the doorway. Finding now that he did not come forward or go on speaking, the guests particularly regarded him. They noticed to their surprise that he stood before them the picture of abject terror—his knees trembling, his hand shaking so violently that the door latch by which he supported himself rattled audibly: his white lips were parted, and his eyes fixed on the merry officer of justice in the middle of the room. A moment more and he had turned, closed the door, and fled.

"What a man can it be?" said the shepherd.

The rest, between the awfulness of their late discovery and the odd conduct of this third visitor, looked as if they knew not what to think, and said nothing. Instinctively they withdrew farther and farther from the grim gentleman in their midst, whom some of them seemed to take for the Prince of Darkness himself, till they

formed a remote circle, an empty space of floor being left between them and him—

“... *circulus, cujus centrum diabolus.*”

The room was so silent—though there were more than twenty people in it—that nothing could be heard but the patter of the rain against the window shutters accompanied by the occasional hiss of a stray drop that fell down the chimney into the fire and the steady puffing of the man in the corner, who had now resumed his long pipe of clay.

The stillness was unexpectedly broken. The distant sound of a gun reverberated through the air—apparently from the direction of the county-town.

“Be jiggered!” cried the stranger who had sung the song, jumping up.

“What does that mean?” asked several.

“A prisoner escaped from the jail—that’s what it means.”

All listened. The sound was repeated, and none of them spoke but the man in the chimney corner, who said quietly, “I’ve often been told that in this county they fire a gun at such times, but I never heard it till now.”

“I wonder if it is my man?” murmured the personage in cinder-gray.

“Surely it is!” said the shepherd involuntarily. “And surely we’ve zeed him! That little man who looked in at the door by now, and quivered like a leaf when he zeed ye and heard your song!”

“His teeth chattered, and the breath went out of his body,” said the dairyman.

“And his heart seemed to sink within him like a stone,” said Oliver Giles.

“And he bolted as if he’d been shot at,” said the hedge carpenter.

“True—his teeth chattered, and his heart seemed to sink, and he bolted as if he’d been shot at,” slowly summed up the man in the chimney corner.

“I didn’t notice it,” remarked the hangman.

“We were all awondering what made him run off in such a fright,” faltered one of the women against the wall, “and now ’tis explained!”

The firing of the alarm gun went on at intervals, low and sullenly, and their suspicions became a certainty. The sinister gentleman

in cinder-gray roused himself. "Is there a constable here?" he asked in thick tones. "If so, let him step forward."

The engaged man of fifty stepped quavering out from the wall, his betrothed beginning to sob on the back of the chair.

"You are a sworn constable?"

"I be, sir."

"Then pursue the criminal at once, with assistance, and bring him back here. He can't have gone far."

"I will, sir, I will—when I've got my staff. I'll go home and get it, and come sharp here, and start in a body."

"Staff!—never mind your staff; the man'll be gone!"

"But I can't do nothing without my staff—can I, William, and John, and Charles Jake? No; for there's the king's royal crown apainted on en in yaller and gold, and the lion and the unicorn, so as when I raise en up and hit my prisoner 'tis made a lawful blow thereby. I wouldn't 'tempt to take up a man without my staff—no, not I. If I hadn't the law to gie me courage, why, instead o' my taking up him, he might take up me!"

"Now, I'm a king's man myself and can give you authority enough for this," said the formidable officer in gray. "Now then, all of ye, be ready. Have ye any lanterns?"

"Yes—have ye any lanterns?—I demand it!" said the constable.

"And the rest of you able-bodied—"

"Able-bodied men—yes—the rest of ye!" said the constable.

"Have you some good stout staves and pitchforks—"

"Staves and pitchforks—in the name o' the law! And take 'em in yer hands and go in quest, and do as we in authority tell ye!"

Thus aroused, the men prepared to give chase. The evidence was indeed, though circumstantial, so convincing that but little argument was needed to show the shepherd's guests that after what they had seen it would look very much like connivance if they did not instantly pursue the unhappy third stranger, who could not as yet have gone more than a few hundred yards over such uneven country.

A shepherd is always well provided with lanterns, and lighting these hastily and with hurddle-staves in their hands, they poured out of the door, taking a direction along the crest of the hill away from the town, the rain having fortunately a little abated.

Disturbed by the noise, or possibly by unpleasant dreams of her baptism, the child who had been christened began to cry heartbrokenly in the room overhead. These notes of grief came down

through the chinks of the floor to the ears of the women below, who jumped up one by one and seemed glad of the excuse to ascend and comfort the baby, for the incidents of the last half-hour greatly oppressed them. Thus in the space of two or three minutes the room on the ground floor was deserted quite.

But it was not for long. Hardly had the sound of footsteps died away when a man returned round the corner of the house from the direction the pursuers had taken. Peeping in at the door and seeing nobody there, he entered leisurely. It was the stranger of the chimney corner, who had gone out with the rest. The motive of his return was shown by his helping himself to a cut piece of skimmer cake that lay on a ledge beside where he had sat and which he had apparently forgotten to take with him. He also poured out half a cup more mead from the quantity that remained, ravenously eating and drinking these as he stood. He had not finished when another figure came in just as quietly—his friend in cinder-gray.

"Oh—you here?" said the latter, smiling. "I thought you had gone to help in the capture." And this speaker also revealed the object of his return by looking solicitously round for the fascinating mug of old mead.

"And I thought you had gone," said the other, continuing his skimmer cake with some effort.

"Well, on second thoughts I felt there were enough without me," said the first confidentially, "and such a night as it is, too. Besides, 'tis the business o' the government to take care of its criminals—not mine."

"True; so it is. And I felt as you did, that there were enough without me."

"I don't want to break my limbs running over the humps and hollows of this wild country."

"Nor I neither; between you and me."

"These shepherd-people are used to it—simple-minded souls, you know, stirred up to anything in a moment. They'll have him ready for me before the morning and no trouble to me at all."

"They'll have him, and we shall have saved ourselves all labor in the matter."

"True, true. Well, my way is to Casterbridge, and 'tis as much as my legs will do to take me that far. Going the same way?"

"No, I am sorry to say! I have to get home over there" (he nodded indefinitely to the right), "and I feel as you do, that it is quite enough for my legs to do before bedtime."

The other had by this time finished the mead in the mug, after which, shaking hands heartily at the door and wishing each other well, they went their several ways.

In the meantime the company of pursuers had reached the end of the hog's-back elevation which dominated this part of the down. They had decided on no particular plan of action, and finding that the man of the baleful trade was no longer in their company, they seemed quite unable to form any such plan now. They descended in all directions down the hill, and straightway several of the party fell into the snare set by Nature for all misguided midnight ramblers over this part of the cretaceous formation. The "lanchets," or flint slopes, which belted the escarpment at intervals of a dozen yards, took the less cautious ones unawares, and losing their footing on the rubbly steep they slid sharply downwards, the lanterns rolling from their hands to the bottom and there lying on their sides till the horn was scorched through.

When they had again gathered themselves together, the shepherd, as the man who knew the country best, took the lead and guided them round these treacherous inclines. The lanterns, which seemed rather to dazzle their eyes and warn the fugitive than to assist them in the exploration, were extinguished, due silence was observed, and in this more rational order they plunged into the vale. It was a grassy, briery, moist defile, affording some shelter to any person who had sought it, but the party perambulated it in vain and ascended on the other side. Here they wandered apart, and after an interval closed together again to report progress. At the second time of closing in they found themselves near a lonely ash, the single tree on this part of the coomb, probably sown there by a passing bird some fifty years before. And here, standing a little to one side of the trunk, as motionless as the trunk itself, appeared the man they were in quest of, his outline being well defined against the sky beyond. The band noiselessly drew up and faced him.

"Your money or your life!" said the constable sternly to the still figure.

"No, no," whispered John Pitcher, "'Tisn't our side ought to say that. That's the doctrine of vagabonds like him, and we be on the side of the law."

"Well, well," replied the constable impatiently, "I must say something, mustn't I? And if you had all the weight o' this undertaking upon your mind, perhaps you'd say the wrong thing, too!—Prisoner

at the bar, surrender, in the name of the Father—the Crown, I mane!”

The man under the tree seemed now to notice them for the first time, and, giving them no opportunity whatever for exhibiting their courage, he strolled slowly towards them. He was indeed the little man, the third stranger, but his trepidation had in a great measure gone.

“Well, travelers,” he said, “did I hear ye speak to me?”

“You did: you’ve got to come and be our prisoner at once!” said the constable. “We arrest ’ee on the charge of not biding in Casterbridge jail in a decent proper manner to be hung tomorrow morning. Neighbors, do your duty, and seize the culprit!”

On hearing the charge the man seemed enlightened and, saying not another word, resigned himself with preternatural civility to the search party, who, with their staves in their hands, surrounded him on all sides and marched him back towards the shepherd’s cottage.

It was eleven o’clock by the time they arrived. The light shining from the open door, a sound of men’s voices within, proclaimed to them as they approached the house that some new events had arisen in their absence. On entering they discovered the shepherd’s living room to be invaded by two officers from Casterbridge jail and a well-known magistrate who lived at the nearest country seat, intelligence of the escape having become generally circulated.

“Gentlemen,” said the constable, “I have brought back your man—not without risk and danger, but everyone must do his duty! He is inside this circle of able-bodied persons, who have lent me useful aid, considering their ignorance of Crown work. Men, bring forward your prisoner!” And the third stranger was led to the light.

“Who is this?” said one of the officials.

“The man,” said the constable.

“Certainly not,” said the turnkey, and the first corroborated his statement.

“But how can it be otherwise?” asked the constable. “Or why was he so terrified at sight o’ the singing instrument of the law who sat there?” Here he related the strange behavior of the third stranger on entering the house during the hangman’s song.

“Can’t understand it,” said the officer coolly. “All I know is that it is not the condemned man. He’s quite a different character from this one; a gauntish fellow with dark hair and eyes, rather good-

looking and with a musical bass voice that if you heard it once you'd never mistake as long as you lived."

"Why, souls—'twas the man in the chimney corner!"

"Hey—what?" said the magistrate, coming forward after inquiring particulars from the shepherd in the background. "Haven't you got the man after all?"

"Well, sir," said the constable, "he's the man we were in search of, that's true, and yet he's not the man we were in search of. For the man we were in search of was not the man we wanted, sir, if you understand my everyday way; for 'twas the man in the chimney corner!"

"A pretty kettle of fish altogether!" said the magistrate.

"You had better start for the other man at once."

The prisoner now spoke for the first time. The mention of the man in the chimney corner seemed to have moved him as nothing else could do. "Sir," he said, stepping forward to the magistrate, "take no more trouble about me. The time is come when I may as well speak. I have done nothing; my crime is that the condemned man is my brother. Early this afternoon I left home at Shottsford to tramp it all the way to Casterbridge jail to bid him farewell. I was benighted and called here to rest and ask the way. When I opened the door I saw before me the very man, my brother, that I thought to see in the condemned cell at Casterbridge. He was in this chimney corner, and jammed close to him, so that he could not have got out if he had tried, was the executioner who'd come to take his life, singing a song about it and not knowing that it was his victim who was close by, joining in to save appearances. My brother looked a glance of agony at me, and I knew he meant, 'Don't reveal what you see; my life depends on it.' I was so terror-struck that I could hardly stand, and not knowing what I did, I turned and hurried away."

The narrator's manner and tone had the stamp of truth, and his story made a great impression on all around. "And do you know where your brother is at the present time?" asked the magistrate.

"I do not. I have never seen him since I closed this door."

"I can testify to that, for we've been between ye ever since," said the constable.

"Where does he think to fly to?—what is his occupation?"

"He's a watch- and clockmaker, sir."

"'A said 'a was a wheelwright—a wicked rogue," said the constable.

"The wheels of clocks and watches he meant, no doubt," said Shepherd Fennel. "I thought his hands were palish for 's trade."

"Well, it appears to me that nothing can be gained by retaining this poor man in custody," said the magistrate; "your business lies with the other, unquestionably."

And so the little man was released offhand, but he looked nothing the less sad on that account, it being beyond the power of magistrate or constable to raze out the written troubles in his brain, for they concerned another whom he regarded with more solicitude than himself. When this was done and the man had gone his way, the night was found to be so far advanced that it was deemed useless to renew the search before the next morning.

Next day, accordingly, the quest for the clever sheep-stealer became general and keen, to all appearance at least. But the intended punishment was cruelly disproportioned to the transgression, and the sympathy of a great many country folk in that district was strongly on the side of the fugitive. Moreover, his marvelous coolness and daring in hob-and-nobbing with the hangman under the unprecedented circumstances of the shepherd's party won their admiration. So that it may be questioned if all those who ostensibly made themselves so busy in exploring woods and fields and lanes were quite so thorough when it came to the private examination of their own lofts and outhouses. Stories were afloat of a mysterious figure being occasionally seen in some old overgrown trackway or other, remote from turnpike roads, but when a search was instituted in any of these suspected quarters, nobody was found. Thus the days and weeks passed without tidings.

In brief, the bass-voiced man of the chimney corner was never recaptured. Some said that he went across the sea, others that he did not but buried himself in the depths of a populous city. At any rate the gentleman in cinder-gray never did his morning's work at Cast-erbridge, nor met anywhere at all, for business purposes, the genial comrade with whom he had passed an hour of relaxation in the lonely house on the coomb.

The grass has long been green on the graves of Shepherd Fennel and his frugal wife; the guests who made up the christening party have mainly followed their entertainers to the tomb; the baby in whose honor they all had met is a matron in the sere and yellow leaf. But the arrival of the three strangers at the shepherd's that night, and the details connected therewith, is a story as well known as ever in the country about Higher Crowstairs. □

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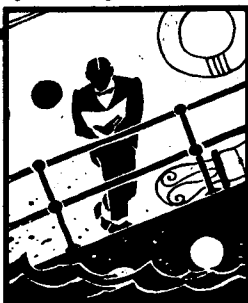
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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Kathy Hogan Trocheck, author of four previous deep South mysteries starring Callahan Garrity, debuts a spunky silver-haired sleuth in **Lickety-Split**. Truman Kicklighter is a widower in St. Petersburg, Florida, surviving on his meager city newspaper pension. Still, his frugal lifestyle—combined with an occasional modest success at the dog track—allows the resourceful Truman to help out his daughter and grandchild. And after all, Truman has a lot of friends around him in the Fountain of Youth Retirement Home. Then events conspire to threaten everything: an old and dear friend suffering from Alzheimer's is accused of a senseless murder, and the home is targeted for the kind of genteel development that will make it unaffordable for most of its current residents. With only a sassy young waitress as a sidekick and his long experience as an investigative reporter, Truman carefully climbs back on his white horse. Trocheck's homey humor and sharp wit add an edge to this cosy tale of an old coot who's back in the saddle and off on a wild ride. (HarperCollins, \$21)

Stephen Greenleaf's latest John Marshall Tanner novel is **Flesh Wounds** (Scribner, \$22), and it's hot. Out of the blue, Marsh gets a long-distance call from Peggy, his former secretary, best friend, and—disastrously—short-term lover. He can do nothing but agree to fly to her new home to meet her, and yes, he will search for the twenty-five-year-old daughter of the man Peggy lives with and plans to marry. The entire setup is painful, and the investigation drags him into the dubious world of erotic art, "life modeling," sex clubs, and porn. We are also privy to short scenes from the viewpoint of Nina Evans, the missing woman. She's bright, beautiful, talented, witty, and troubled, and it's scary watching her run from

a phantom menace into the arms of a flesh and blood one. Greenleaf's Marsh has aged and his world may be too dark and dismal for some, but his prose is crisp, his dialogue slides down as smoothly as old scotch, and his story revolves around some new technology that will terrify computerphobes. It may disturb the dreams of everyone else, too.

Packed with action, scenery, conservation issues, and a large cast of well-drawn characters, Kirk Mitchell brings back Bureau of Land Management agent Dee Laguerre in his super second book, **Deep Valley Malice** (Avon, \$4.99). Dee's Basque origin adds an edge to her droll wit; it is probably also responsible for her strong sense of loyalty, her deep commitment to the land of the California sagebrush country, and her fierce independence and self-sufficiency. She's an appealing character, strong and resilient and able to get herself out of several life-threatening situations. Lots of action, a powerful cast of supporting players, and an historical perspective on the politics surrounding California's precious water supply all contribute to this briskly paced thriller.

San Francisco private detective Maggie Garrett returns in an intriguing case titled **The Last of Her Lies** (Seal Press, \$10.95pb) by Jean Taylor. A wealthy man hires Maggie to find a young woman named Kelly who has disappeared, leaving behind a journal about her therapy with the client's adult daughter, Moira—a clear picture of a lesbian therapist manipulating a young female client into having a sexual relationship—with the client paying for the privilege, no less. Maggie has been hired on the premise that, as a lesbian herself, she can perhaps persuade Moira to cooperate in a defense on her behalf. Alas, Moira refuses, claiming client privilege. So Maggie begins to trace the missing Kelly's footsteps, and a picture begins to emerge of a woman who is many different things to different people, none of which match up with a real identity. There's a budding romance (with a woman cop), lots of secrets buried in ancient family history, and an unexpected ending: a lot of entertainment for a mystery reader's buck.

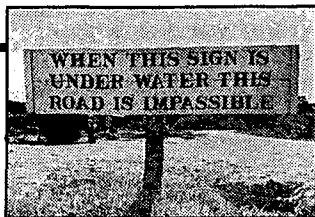
The intrigue in **The Web** (Bantam, \$23.95) spins out of a surprisingly simple premise in Jonathan Kellerman's tenth thriller featuring child psychologist Alex Delaware. Alex and his lover Robin arrive on the small Pacific island of Aruk for a three month sojourn in paradise, guests of Dr. Woodrow Wilson Moreland, a scientist, longtime island resident, and philanthropist. But there's trouble in paradise. The couple soon learn of the brutal, unsolved

murder of a young island woman; their host is distant and secretive; the army base and all its personnel have literally fenced themselves off on the far side of the island; and the island's economy is suffering. It is not a happy scene. Kellerman has put his own spin on the beloved houseparty murder mystery formula that Christie and Ngaio Marsh employed to such effect, and with the help of trusty Milo and the miracle of electronic research available back in L.A., Alex finally solves the crime. Mercifully, he doesn't do so before he's shared the exotic customs of Aruk, the food, the foliage, and even a terrifying island storm. I don't imagine it's exactly what Robin and Alex had in mind for their vacation, but it's quite a trip for readers.

Its slight plot precludes our calling it a conventional mystery, but Ellen Feldman's **Rearview Mirror** (Delacorte, \$22.95) is mesmerizing as a psychological suspense novel. Protagonist Hallie Fields is a hardworking and moderately successful freelance feature writer living the single life in Manhattan. Though usually a thoroughgoing professional, Hallie finds herself inexorably drawn into the lives of both of her current assignments. Her associations with a charismatic philanthropist and a popular woman author of young adult fiction lead to relationships, which breaks one of Hallie's cardinal rules as a profile writer: don't get involved with your subjects. From this inside angle, however, she witnesses several visages of love for the first time in her life. These faces will prove to be comforting and terrifying, generous and spiteful, glorious and quite deadly.

Paula Gosling's **The Dead of Winter** (Mysterious Press, \$21.95) brings back Sheriff Matt Gabriel of Backwater Bay, a small Great Lakes resort town. This time out, Matt shares the spotlight with Jess Gibbons, a young woman who has returned to her hometown to teach in the local high school. As Backwater Bay is hit with a recordbreaking blizzard, one of Jess's students vanishes. Matt already has his hands full with a very frozen corpse pulled from the lake by one of the ubiquitous ice fishermen; the teenager may simply have run off with friends. Jess doesn't agree, and her snooping leads her onto very thin ice. This American author has lived in England for many years, and it shows in her Backwater Bay series with its lively small-town characters and concerns. Anyone who loves mysteries by June Thompson, E. X. Ferrars, and other British crime writers of the recent past will appreciate this one. □

THE STORY THAT WON



ous Photograph contest Weiss of Livingston, mentions go to Nils V. ville, Massachusetts; Canyon, California; Paul, Minnesota; Ted sylvania; Robert Kesling

The February Mystery was won by Bernice F. New Jersey. Honorable Bockmann of Center-Paula T. Dersom of Bell Chaunce Stanton of St. Shirey of Austin, Penn- of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Shana Carter of Ithaca, New York; C. T. Landry of LaPlace, Louisiana; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; and Mike Hankins of Martinsville, Indiana.

NO SIGN OF LIFE by Bernice F. Weiss

Minnie Lou, the daughter of Brian Baker the Sign Maker, had planned the perfect murder. The victim was to be Hiram Lake, who had left her at the altar last month. He would pay with his life for that indignity. And one of her father's signs would be the means of her revenge.

Brian Baker the Sign Maker did such fine work, Minnie Lou thought. When she had complained about how hard it was to keep track of attendance in her one-room schoolhouse, Brian made a sign that read IF YOU ARE ABSENT, YOU MUST LET TEACHER KNOW YOU ARE NOT HERE BEFORE LEAVING. Her record-keeping got easier.

When a delivery truck had hit Minnie Lou's car outside the general store, Brian made a sign saying TRUCKS MUST NOT BACK INTO CARS HERE. Never happened again.

Minnie Lou thought the new sign was his best yet. Last year the spring thaw had caused a lot of flooding, so now Brian put up a clear, colorful sign on Old Mill Road leading to their house saying WHEN THIS SIGN IS UNDER WATER THIS ROAD IS IMPASSIBLE. She figured it would save a lot of lives. But not Hiram's! When the spring floods came again, Minnie Lou would call Hiram and ask him to come to see her about something very important, and then—she would take away the sign. No one would ever think it was anything but an accident.

Now all she had to do was wait for the flood!

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AH July '96

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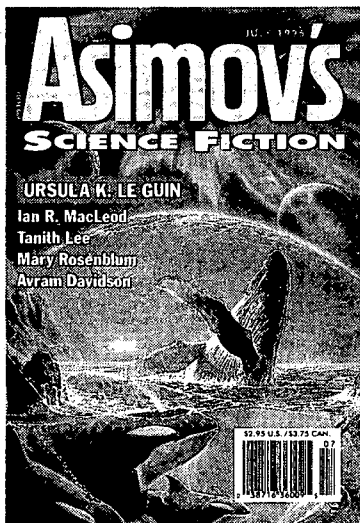
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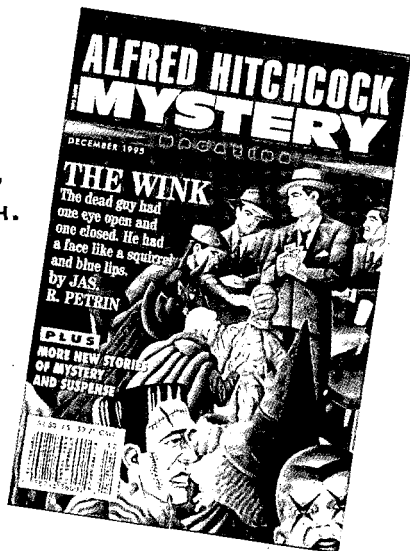
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HEALTH UPDATE



After the baby, nothing came off. Then I used the Six-Day BioDiet three times and lost a total of 38 pounds!

—Gina Muta



Use metabolic enhancers to shed those unwanted pounds—in just six days!

New program uses fruit and vegetable diet meals, metabolic enhancers, vitamin supplements and dieter's tea to cleanse impurities from your body, jump-starting you to a new lifestyle!



The BioDiet cocktails are made from a wide array of vegetables and fruits. BioDiet provides all the nutritional value you need during the program.

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All-natural. Ingredients are selected for freshness, purity and nutritional

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On days one, three and five, you'll drink the fruit cocktail, which contains juice from blackberries, white grapes, apples, pineapples, oranges and bananas.



On days two, four and six, you'll drink the vegetable cocktail, which contains juice from carrots, celery, tomatoes, watercress, beets, potatoes and radishes.

*Not all ingredients listed